

# the good fight

A boxing gym in Naenae keeps kids off the street.



Billy Graham says he's never done anything as fulfilling as running the Naenae Boxing Academy.

DAVID READ

**T**hey used to call Naenae – a hard-scrabble Lower Hutt suburb – two miles of trouble. But something's happening here. There's no tagging. The

25 or 30 truants who used to hang around the shops every day, pestering people for money and cigarettes, have gone. The local police note pensioners are no longer scared to venture into the shopping centre.

Miracles, they say, occur in the strangest of places.

To find out what's changed, drive past rows of 1940s state houses to the corner of Sladden and Treadwell Sts and what was once a Salvation Army hall.

Outside on a clipped lawn are 35 immaculate granite stones. On each one is a painting by Wellington artist Dan Mills of a legendary heavyweight boxing champion, from Irish American John L. Sullivan to Vitali Klitschko, with all their vital statistics, right down to their nicknames.

In the centre, reflecting the site's past and the beliefs of the current owner, the largest stone features a replica of *The Creation of Adam*, from the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican, with the words, "Undefeated champion of the universe, Jesus Christ, King of Kings."

Since 2006, the old hall has been the Naenae Boxing Academy, and on any given night up to 60 boys and young men (of more than 100 registered members) are here skipping, doing press-ups, hefting a medicine ball, sparring or hitting a punch bag.

At the centre of the action is a 60-year-old dynamo, Billy Graham, whose work as a motivational speaker has taken him to the United States, Great Britain and Asia. He bought the building, installed the ring, lined the walls with immaculately framed vintage boxing posters and makes sure everything is kept so spotless there's not even a hint of the traditional old-sweat-and-socks smell.

"Only 20 of the boys get in the ring to spar, and we only have eight registered boxers," says Graham. "The rest do general fitness work, or are just there in support. Our aim here is not so much to teach boys to box, but to be men; to step over the line in the right way."

And it's working, says Naenae community constable Russ Calivati. "It's not just the good effect Billy has on these kids, but the influence they then have on their peers."

Initially, Graham financed the academy himself. Now he has sponsorship from Vodafone and Harcourts. There are donations

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from individuals, too.

For Graham, returning to Naenae – where he’s now converted the former chapel next door to the gym into a house for him and his family – completes a circle of the heart.

The first time he went into a boxing gym, he was escorted by a policeman. Graham was eight years old, growing up not bad but certainly wild in Naenae, when local cop Hoppy Hodges caught him nicking a load of chocolate biscuits at 3am from the Griffins factory.

“If Hoppy thought there was a spark of good in you he’d work on it,” says Graham.

So instead of landing in juvenile court, Graham was despatched by Hodges to the gym of New Zealand’s greatest boxing trainer, Dick Dunn. Dunn was known as the “Father of the Hutt Valley” and for Graham, one of six kids in a home where heavy drinking was a way of life, he was exactly the right man at the right time.

A gently spoken, ramrod-backed, old-style gentleman, he banned swearing and made his teenage charges promise to leave cigarettes and booze alone.

Graham grew to love him and, in his formal, understated way, Dunn (who died aged 93 in 2001) loved him back. “He never let one of his boxers get hurt,” says Graham. “From start to finish he showed you how to avoid being hit.”

Graham became a national amateur champion and won the Jamieson Belt as the most scientific boxer in the country. He was never injured.

In 1983 Graham, a butcher by trade, was asked to fill in as speaker at an insurance company conference. It was his first public engagement and paid him \$500. Within months, motivational speaking would become a profession he still loves. “But I’ve never done anything in my life that’s as fulfilling as the academy is. It’s exciting. And the best thing is, we’ve only started.”

PHIL GIFFORD



## Chop Chop

For Reporoa farmer Jason O’Connell, speed was vital when he hit a wooden fence post on his farm bike. His head, pelvic and spinal injuries were so extensive the 21-year-old has no recollection of two emergency flights on the Westpac rescue helicopter. But he says the chopper saved his life, as he took a turn for the worse flying to Waikato Hospital and had to be flown back to Rotorua to be stabilised.

“If it wasn’t for the rescue helicopter, I could have died. They were really worried about me over the Mamakus [the ranges that separate the Rotorua district and Waikato].”

Eighteen dedicated emergency helicopters, run by charitable trusts, are on call throughout the country. Each year, more than 4000 people are rescued – whether they’ve crashed their car on a remote stretch of road, given birth prematurely in a town with no specialist services, or been injured out in the bush.

Aucklander Jenni Mee, whose two-year-old daughter was whisked to the Middlemore Hospital burns unit from Whitianga 15 years ago, finds the memory is still very fresh. “Every time I see a rescue helicopter I still get tears in my eyes and think, ‘Oh God, there’s someone going through real trauma in there.’”

While the service doesn’t charge the people it rescues, it costs plenty to run. The Westpac Chopper Appeal is on now until the end of June. To make a donation, visit [haveapart.co.nz](http://haveapart.co.nz) or any Westpac branch.

## Recommended

### Good Oils

Margaret Hema doesn’t need to advertise her facial oils – although actress Liv Tyler’s unscripted recommendation a few years ago prompted a flurry of orders from ritzy spas and beauty stores in London and the US. (When not on elf duty during the filming of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Tyler was a regular client of Hema’s at her Wellington beauty therapy studio.)

There’s a touch of fairy dust about Hema, actually. Maybe it’s blending all those organic oils and breathing in the sweet smell of Pacific blue lavender and manuka honey, but she radiates a kind of child-like joy; she doesn’t look like a woman in her 60s, nor much behave like one. She also does a superb facial

– without exfoliants, skin-shrinking clay masks and steam machines – so you leave looking radiant, not like a scrubbed kumara.

But if you can’t get to her Wellington City studio, you can buy her products at stores in the capital and Wairarapa, Auckland (Isabel Harris), Queenstown (Vista), Christchurch (Lush Skin & Body) and Lyttelton (Portico). Top sellers are the Hema Millennium Face & Body Oil (125ml) and Cleansing Oil (100ml, both about \$110), and she’s recently added a cream and Floral Facial Spray. They’re all organic, New Zealand-sourced and blended by hand by the facial fairy queen herself. Check [hemaproducts.com](http://hemaproducts.com) for stockists and product details.

Hema’s daughter, Donyale, now has her own offshoot of the family business, bottling Hema artesian water sourced from the Blue Spring at the foothills of the Mamaku Ranges (visit [hemawater.co.nz](http://hemawater.co.nz)).