

Activist fought for troubled kids

Former boxer founded BUILD program to help combat gangs, get youth off streets

By Trevor Jensen
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Robert F. Jemilo, a Golden Gloves boxing champion from Chicago's Southwest Side who had a brief professional ring career, helped start the BUILD program in the Wicker Park neighborhood in 1969 to get young gang members off the streets.

Known as "Scap Iron" or "Scraper," Mr. Jemilo, 72, of Hickory Hills died of congestive heart failure on Sunday, July 20, in Northwestern Memorial Hospital, said his son Drew.

BUILD, which stands for Broader Urban Involvement and Leadership Development, was started by Mr. Jemilo and Hank Bach after funding for the YMCA outreach program they were running was cut, a BUILD spokeswoman said.

The program began as an intervention program that sent workers out in the neighborhood to persuade gang members and other troubled youths to come in for help. It later added a prevention component to its programs, which include drug education, school help and sports, said Alfredo Calixto, BUILD's executive director.

Mr. Jemilo led fundraising efforts that enlisted help from neighborhood activists and corporate heavyweights such as Marshall Field V.

Field sometimes toured the crime-ridden neighbor-

hoods served by BUILD with Mr. Jemilo, much to the consternation of his Mr. Jemilo's brother John, a former deputy superintendent with the Chicago police.

"I'd say, 'Bob, you're taking Marshall Field into these gang-infested areas,'" said John Jemilo, who made sure police officers in the district kept an eye on his brother and Field.

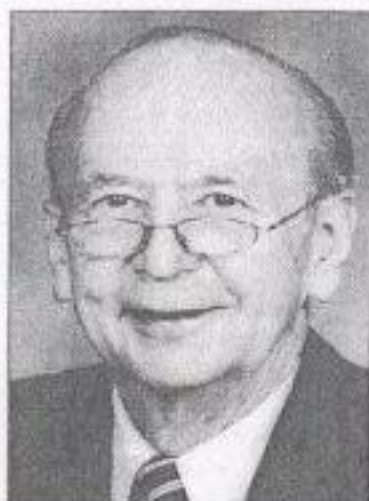
Mr. Jemilo's efforts, which included getting BUILD on United Way's roster and forming an affiliation with the Chicago Public Schools, laid the financial foundation that allowed the organization to survive through tough times for non-profits, Calixto said. The organization now works with about 2,700 young people a year, Calixto said.

Calixto said Mr. Jemilo was responsible for establishing a diverse funding base.

The son of a Chicago police officer, Mr. Jemilo grew up in the West Elsdon neighborhood and graduated from St. Rita High School. He won the 112-pound novice championship in the 1952 Golden Gloves, and the next year took home a Catholic Youth Organization championship.

Mr. Jemilo attended Michigan State University on a boxing scholarship, where he received his degree in social work and later a master's in recreation education, his brother said.

Turning professional, he



Robert Jemilo fought professionally five times, winning three bouts.

won his first three fights before a loss and a draw against stiffer competition persuaded him to lay down his gloves.

Mr. Jemilo worked as a coordinator with the YMCA's outreach programs for troubled youths before starting BUILD.

"He had a feel for disadvantaged youth," his brother said. "He got into this social work field in school, and that really expanded his outlook."

About 1980, Mr. Jemilo left BUILD to work with the United Way, his son said. He continued to be close to BUILD, regularly attending annual meetings.

Mr. Jemilo was divorced from his first wife. His second wife, Patricia, died in 2002.

In addition to his son and brother, Mr. Jemilo is survived by his fiancée, Miriam Simerly; two sons, Jim and Joe; a daughter, Cathi Novak; a brother, Tom; and nine grandchildren.

Visitation will be held from 3 to 9 p.m. Thursday in Hills Funeral Home, 10201 S. Roberts Rd., Palos Hills. Mass will be said at 10 a.m. Friday in St. Patricia Catholic Church, 8600 W. 89th St., Hickory Hills.

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