

Most reply by flexing their small biceps. One child, just to his right, is almost motionless; the tip of his straightened right index finger is aimed at his temple.

“Look where he’s pointing,” Yasin-Bradley calmly says.

“On the count of three, ‘Use my mind,’” he loudly instructs. “One, two, three.”

“Use my mind,” shouts the group of nearly 20 in unison.

MORE THAN MUSCLE-UPS

Most call 5-foot-7 Yasin-Bradley Giant. He said it’s an acronym for “growing is a noble thing.” The name was born of being “the shortest guy with something really big to say.” At 44, Giant—and the Bartendaz group he founded—is known throughout Harlem, and he and his crew are known on the Internet for the impressive gymnastics skills they display.

Three days a week, the Bartendaz are at a Harlem park, practicing what they call the seven natural movements—push-ups, pull-ups, squats, lunges, jumps, dips and planks—in an explosive style more akin to an artistic performance than a workout.

But Bartendaz is part of something bigger: It’s the fitness arm of nonprofit Giant Thinking. Its mission is youth gang prevention, according to GuideStar, an organization that collects and shares information about nonprofit organizations. Bartendaz melds fitness, martial arts, youth empowerment and elements of hip-hop culture to “push our youth and our communities to higher standards of physical, social and moral excellence,” according to the Bartendaz’s website.

They’ve created fitness and mental-empowerment programs for schools, community organizations and inmates on Rikers Island, and this summer they organized the Days of Movement. The fifth annual event included individual and team performances, and residents throughout Harlem and New York City attended.

Larry Jackson, the senior director of career services at a workforce-development agency called Strive International, called Giant “a valuable commodity” in a community heavily influenced by media images.

He’s hired Giant over the past 10 years to speak to young adults working toward earning a GED diploma through Strive International’s New York City affiliate in Harlem. Whenever Giant speaks, “a light goes off in somebody’s head,” said Jackson, a 30-year resident of the area.



Bartendaz founder
Hassan Yasin-Bradley,
known as Giant.

TENDING BAR

About 10 years ago, a man called Giant started the Bartendaz fitness movement in the country’s black-culture capital. Today, he’s spreading his message beyond Harlem and seeking to change more than your body.

WRITTEN BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL | PHOTOS BY SHAUN CLEARY

Standing in a half circle, they slightly tilt their heads back to see his face.

“Where’s the strongest muscle in the body?” Hassan Yasin-Bradley asks the children, all under the age of 12.

They’re standing around him on the shiny basketball court inside Harlem’s Polo Grounds Community Center, which hosts the after-school program.

“What he adds is just another level of reassurance that you can succeed, that you can do well,” he said.

Bartendaz is a household name in the Manhattan neighborhood, Jackson said, and in the summer of 2012, Nike Inc. ads featuring Giant could be seen in parts of the New York City subway system. One pictured him atop a square stone as if he were a statue in Harlem’s Marcus Garvey Park at 124th Street and Madison Avenue. Text was printed across the top of the ad in plain, white block letters: “Ten years ago Giant created a workout in this park. Today it’s a movement followed by many. He believes you should work with what you have and that’s what he’s proven.” That was followed by the hashtag #FindGreatness.

The ad stemmed from Nike’s “find your greatness” campaign connected to the 2012 Summer Olympics, Nike spokeswoman Joy Davis-Fair said via email.

“The NYC brand team translated this campaign locally and connected with several local athletes (heroes) who exhibited this sentiment,” she wrote.

The relationship had started two years earlier, when the Oregon-based company’s New York marketing team found

out about the Bartendaz through word of mouth and came to view Giant as an “influencer,” Davis-Fair said via phone.

“Anyone who’s doing positive things through physical movement is someone we would align with,” she added.

Nike supplies T-shirts, shoes and other gear to the Bartendaz.

Besides the original group in Harlem, there are four Bartendaz affiliates, including Team Regiment Bartendaz in Canada.

To become an affiliate, you must attend a two-day workshop in Harlem or pay for a Bartendaz representative to travel to you. The workshop focuses on not only explaining the group and its movement system but also—and more importantly to the leadership—the mental aspects of Giant Thinking. New affiliates are left with a packet serving as guidance on taking physical fitness and mental-empowerment into local schools “so they can actually make money,” explained Solomon Gold, a member of the core Bartendaz team who goes by Dr. Good Body, but most often Dr. G for short.



Donald Phinazee, known as Bandana, claps his hands behind his back at the top of an explosive push-up at Colonel Charles Young Playground.

Gold has traveled to such countries as Latvia, Norway, Russia and Spain on invitations from organizations that want to learn more about Bartendaz and Giant Thinking. What started as simply one man exercising in a public park has turned into an international movement. Still, it’s not enough.

“YOU HAVE TO HAVE THE PROPER CAP—CHARACTER, ATTITUDE, PERSONALITY—AND A CERTAIN MORAL FIBER. WE CAN ALWAYS TEACH YOU THE MOVEMENTS LATER.”

—DR. G



Talía Coles—who goes by Iso, short for Isometriculos—does pull-ups with bent knees. Coles is a singer-songwriter whose music can be found on iTunes.

“We have a lot more work to do,” Giant said after a Bartendaz workout on a chilly Saturday morning in late October at Fred Samuel Playground in Harlem.

“I’m not even halfway where I need to be.”

LIFE AS A BARTENDA

To become a Bartenda, you first must enroll in Giant Thinking classes, Dr. G explained, to avoid being a “mental midget” influenced by society and media.

“We put them through, for lack of a better word, a mental ringer,” he said. “The first thing we say is, ‘You have to have the proper CAP—character, attitude, personality—and a certain moral fiber. We can always teach you the movements later. It’s not about how muscular you are or how many pull-ups you can do or your movements on the bar. It’s about how you treat people.’”

And you must memorize the mission statement.

“That’s a big one,” Dr. G noted.

Specifically, prospective members endure a probation period lasting anywhere from six weeks to three months, depending on the individual. One to two hours per week is spent hearing from Giant and Dr. G about the organization’s philosophy. The hopefuls also are taken to schools at which Bartendaz leads programs, “where they pull their pants up and take off their hat.”

“The whole key of Bartendaz is Giant Thinking,” Dr. G said, referencing the group’s logo—a male silhouette with a light bulb in his head as he bends a pull-up bar over his shoulders.

One group of hopefuls had to feed the homeless for three days in various locations throughout Harlem.

“We had nine. Three made it,” Dr. G said.

One of those is Laquana Reardon-Thornton, who goes by Earth. She is one of few Bartendaz women who can do an “incredible”—or, as the CrossFit community knows it, a strict bar muscle-up.

You can find Earth alongside Giant at the Polo Grounds Community Center, or at either the Fred Samuel or the Colonel Charles Young playgrounds in Harlem.

The Bartendaz meet three times a week to practice: Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Saturday’s 11-a.m. session is open to the public.

During a Thursday-afternoon practice in late October at Colonel Charles Young Playground, Josh Likens, called

Kentucky as an homage to his home state, got up to the dip bars and simply held himself at the top. His arms weren't quite locked out, and his feet were suspended off the black playground mats. A handful of other Bartendaz cheered him on.

"Go, go, go, go, go, go!" one person shouted.

"Don't stop! Pedal!" loudly said another as Kentucky moved his feet in circles parallel to each other.

"IT'S NOT ABOUT HOW MUSCULAR YOU ARE OR HOW MANY PULL-UPS YOU CAN DO OR YOUR MOVEMENTS ON THE BAR. IT'S ABOUT HOW YOU TREAT PEOPLE."

—DR. G.

"This move is very important to me," Giant explained. "I just want you to be able to hold your body up. I teach that before the pull-up."

Then his attention moved back to Kentucky.

"Excellent hold. One more. Excellent hold. One more. Beautiful."

The team members took to the bars one at a time, and Giant directed each one with an approachable-yet-unyielding command that exuded confidence in himself and in the athlete.

Once Kentucky was off the bars, it was time for Michael Fontanez to do his thing. Cinder Block, as he is known, is more accomplished than Kentucky. He showed off incredible spins on the pull-up bar and even a human flag.

"What the body can do—nothin' like it," Giant said excitedly.

Then it was Talia Coles, who goes by Iso—short for Isometriculos. With an underhand grip, she held her chin just above the pull-up bar with gloved hands. Then, Giant instructed her to begin methodically pedaling.

"And step. And step. And step. And step. And step. And down," he told her before the rest of the team cheered.

"I want more than one muscle constantly moving," Giant said loudly.

Coles, a singer-songwriter and fashion stylist, met Giant about 12 years ago. When she started with the Bartendaz, she couldn't do one pull-up. Now she's one of the few women on the team who can.

"It's not easy pulling up your own body weight," she said after the session. "It's harder than pulling up any weights."

DRINKS AT THE BAR

Giant was 24 when he was released from jail. Because of his good behavior, he was granted work release for the final year of his four-year sentence. Possession of a controlled substance led to his imprisonment, though he maintains his innocence and said his only crime was being with "the wrong crew."

Jail, he said, altered everything.

"It really terrified me and changed my life," Giant explained. "I'm proud to say ... that woke me up."

Behind those walls, he saw his friends and his elders.

"That was not a cool place to be," he said. "I'm so thankful (for being in jail). Who knows what would have happened to me if I didn't go to jail?"

There, he met men who posed to him philosophical questions: "Who are you?" and "Do you have freedom?"

They "put me under their wing, put a book in my hand. They said, 'Come to the library,'" he recounted. "I decided to say, 'Let me just look at the man in the mirror,' and I didn't like what I saw. My mother didn't teach me to go to jail."

When Giant got out, he had a different sense of self.

"I came out and said, 'I'm not going back.'"

That led to self-empowerment speeches in neighborhood schools, community centers, and churches in an effort to prevent children from joining gangs and to steer them clear of alcohol abuse. All along, he had been doing pull-ups, dips, lunges, squats, push-ups, planks and jumps at Harlem parks just as a way to stay in shape on a budget—like many other residents in inner New York City.

"He's been exercising or working out since he was 10, 11 years old. So by the time the people actually started to take notice, he was in his late 20s, early 30s," Dr. G said.

He later added: "The park became his sanctuary. The park became his refuge. That became his laboratory."

Giant demonstrates a bent-knee chin-up on a wheeled bar during a Bartendaz-led after-school program at the Polo Grounds Community Center in Harlem.



When the after-school program for children under 12 ends at the Polo Grounds Community Center, Giant huddles the group together. He emphasizes physical fitness as well as the power of the mind.

Over time, Giant began to add his own flair—moving right to left on the pull-up bar, pedaling his feet as if on an imaginary bicycle during dips, spinning around the bar with his hips flexors as the axis—simply to ward off the boredom of routine.

“One of the teachers in one of the schools asked him to put something together from the physical-fitness side because a lot of the children were actually cutting gym,” Dr. G said.

Giant’s initial response: “I’m not a P.E. teacher.”

Days later, he was working out in a park when a neighborhood woman walked by. The story goes that she told him, “Every time I see you on the bar, you make me dizzy. I feel drunk watching you.”

And that’s what gave Giant the inspiration for the name Bartendaz and further inspired him to develop a physical-fitness program for his neighborhood schools.



Giant uses his elbows to spin around the bar so quickly that he loses his hat at Colonel Charles Young Playground in Harlem.

“He took what he did in the park,” Dr. G explained, “and said, ‘Wow, in order to attract those people, that so-called at-risk crowd,’ he said, ‘What can I do to keep these people interested?’”

Giant gleaned from multiple sources, creating something uniquely his own in the process.

“It was urban, it was cool, it was break dancing, it was cutting edge, and he’s telling you something about using your mind. He’s not just strong intellectually but stronger than anybody else in that room,” Dr. G recounted.

The message was clear.

“Pull-ups on the right bars instead of the wrong bars,” Dr. G said. “Have these drinks from the fountain of youth as opposed to goin’ to the bar on the corner.”

He noted: “Where we live, there’s a bar on almost every corner.”

The idea is to use words the audience already knows and turn them on their heads.

**“IF YOU CAN’T DO 25 PUSH-UPS,
WHY THE FUCK YOU TRYIN’ TO
BENCH PRESS FOR?”**

—DR. G

“Makes them think, ‘Wow, Bartendaz. Wow, he’s not talking about drinks,’” Dr. G emphasized.

For Giant, word choice is paramount.

“Words make people and people make words,” he often says.

He tells children and adults alike not to focus on the “bling bling” but on the “think think.” And he’s got an acronym for just about everything—“pimp,” he says, means “poor image of a man’s personality.”

Over time, Giant and Dr. G noticed changes in students’ attitudes.

“The most at-risk started to flock to our programs,” Dr. G said. “At-risk students started to become student-body presidents, go on to college.”

But the awe-inspiring acrobatics, he said, were simply the bait on the hook.

“The real jewel of Bartendaz is the Giant Thinking concept,” Dr. G explained. “You have schools now that don’t have gyms with P.E. teachers. What the education system has missed is moving your body is an integral part of growing your brain.”

Giant and Dr. G call it fundamental functional movement.

“It’s at the very root of athleticism,” Dr. G said.

He added: “We’re a human-repair agency. It’s our job to try to fix people who’ve been broken.”

ONLY IN HARLEM

The Fred Samuel Playground is at 140th Street and Lennox Avenue, also known as Malcolm X Boulevard. Two blocks away—on 142nd and Lennox—is where the famed Cotton Club operated from 1923 to 1940. The whites-only establishment hosted many of the best black entertainers of the day: Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday—the list goes on.

“No other place but Harlem could give birth to the Bartendaz,” Dr. G said while standing in the playground on a Saturday morning.

Harlem, he later added, has historically been “the epicenter” for black culture.

“And the Bartendaz speak directly to that,” Dr. G said.

With a population of nearly 350,000, according to the New York City Department of City Planning, Harlem is like many places, Dr. G said, comprising individuals and families trying to find their way in the world. He called it “a poetic village.”

Leslie Wyche, known as the Mayor of Harlem for about 35 years, referred to it as “the black capital of the world.”

“It’s the economic, cultural capital of the world. We have every kind of imaginable cultural theme in Harlem,” he said.

The 65-year-old has held positions with various New York City agencies, including the New York Housing Authority and the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development.

Adam Clayton Powell—“one of America’s greatest politicians”—was from Harlem, Wyche pointed out. Powell presided over the powerful House Education and Labor Committee in the 1960s and was key in passing legislation that made lynching a federal crime and that desegregated public schools.

“This has always been a place for fertile minds,” said Marc Cary, a jazz pianist who lives in Harlem.

The 46-year-old has played and recorded with the likes of Erykah Badu, Betty Carter, Ani DiFranco, Dizzy Gillespie, Lauryn Hill, Abbey Lincoln, Meshell Ndegeocello and Arthur Taylor. He started working out with the Bartendaz about three years ago.

“(Harlem is) a place where things have been activated and affected the world,” Cary said. “It’s no wonder they’re here.”

THE PIED PIPER

As of November, Giant and the Bartendaz were working with seven New York City public schools, including Eagle Academy for Young Men II in Brooklyn, Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn and John Adams High School in Queens. Besides Polo Grounds Community Center, they also can be found in other community organizations like Minisink Townhouse and the Boys & Girls Club in Mount Vernon.

The structure of Bartendaz programs in those places depends on the place itself, Dr. G said.

One size fits all?

“It can’t be,” he said. “Each location is unique.”

At Polo Grounds, for example, children are “basketball crazy,” he noted. So Bartendaz created a program that included push-ups on a basketball, incorporating a familiar object with a movement that wasn’t simply about playing the game.

“They have to know that there’s more in the world than basketball,” Dr. G explained.

And in some cases, Bartendaz has gone to schools simply to talk about the “basic dialogue of respect,” he said. Physical fitness wasn’t emphasized.

In September, Bartendaz traveled on its own dime to Crawford High School and Hoover High School, both in San Diego, for an “edutainment” show introducing themselves and Giant Thinking to students and staff.



During Bartendaz practices at any of several Harlem parks, the team can be heard praising the group's founder by vigorously yelling out "Barfather" in unison.

Two months later, Bartendaz was back on the West Coast to do the same thing at Washington Preparatory High School and Crenshaw High School, both in Los Angeles.

"This is all we do. This is our life," said Dr. G, who, like Giant, is solely employed by Bartendaz.

"IF I GOTTA TAKE OFF MY SHIRT TO SHOW YOU HOW STRONG I AM, THEN I MISSED THE POINT."

—GIANT

The goal?

"To better humanity," he flatly stated. "We use exercise as a metaphor for life."

Physical strength supports mental strength, Giant frequently emphasizes.

"If all you got is the bar," he said, "you're lost."

To spread their message, they want to grow the number of affiliates worldwide, establish a fee system for them and grow to a point where they can hire employees. It might seem like a lofty goal. But Bartendaz believe anything is possible under the leadership of the man they call "the Barfather."

"Giant is like the Muhammad Ali character: He's brash, he's bold. But in the community, he's like the Pied Piper," Dr. G said. "He's done the impossible in the middle of Harlem: You got kids who want to exercise, adults who want to exercise."

Describing himself as humble, Giant likened Bartendaz and Giant Thinking to the Black Panther Party.

"I just put more sunshine in the air," he said.

Giant added that he has trouble articulating his feelings on what he's created.

"I can't explain to you what it means. The bars were empty," he said, referring to pull-up bars in Harlem parks.

"They're not gonna appreciate what I brought, I'm gonna say, for another 10 years," Giant continued. "I'm just thankful that I was a product of my environment and now I have a product for my environment."

"I GOT LATS THAT COME OUT LIKE COBRAS."

—GIANT

Today, there are a multitude of bar-workout groups, including the Barmasters, the BarStarzz and the Bar-Bar-ians. By most people's accounts, Giant and the Bartendaz are considered to be the originators, with many copycats.

Warrington Hudlin called Giant "a medicine man walking among us."

Hudlin produced such films as *House Party* and *Boomerang*, and he is the founding president of the Black Filmmaker Foundation. He also serves on the board of the Museum of the Moving Image.

The Tribeca-based filmmaker met Giant in 2006, when he was working on the BET television show *Iron Ring*. Giant was to be one of the trainers. The show was canceled after airing for a few months in 2008. Hudlin was instantly impressed with Giant and has since connected him to community leaders so he can further disseminate his message.

"I don't want to overstate this, but I've been around a long time, and I've seen people who are just special, who not only have charisma but the humility to go along with that," the 61-year-old said. "Someone told me (Giant is a) cross between Jack LaLanne and Malcolm X—and that's how I see him, and that's a very special person."

As for the future of Bartendaz and Giant Thinking, the plan is to keep walking the current path and growing.

"Continue to have the opportunity to touch lives and make a difference. 'Giant' is a metaphor for life—you can do it without a budget. It's as simple as exercise, as simple as a smile, as simple as words," Giant said.

Bartendaz is also working to obtain indoor space for a gym and possibly an obstacle course. And Giant is entertaining the idea of the so-called G-Games, which Dr. G described as "almost like Disneyland" with a dodgeball area and a jump-rope area, for example, for some friendly competition among individuals and families.

"It's a beautiful thing what he does for the community," Clintonia Anderson said of Giant as she stood just outside the gates of the Fred Samuel Playground.

The 53-year-old Harlem native has known him for 13 years. She's been working out with the Bartendaz since 2007. Most people call her Nettie Nanette.

"There's brothers out here doin' the wrong things. He pulls them in to do the right thing," she said. "I've watched all of them want to be Bartendaz."

BODY AND MIND

The children are in a large circle inside the Polo Grounds Community Center. With the exception of one girl, it's all boys.

Giant raises his left index finger to hold it vertically on his lips.

The children quickly get silent.

"Repeat after me: physical fitness," Giant shouts.

"Physical fitness," the children echo.

"Self-empowerment," he says next.

"Self-empowerment," they say back.

"Bartendaz, one, two, three," he shouts.

"Bartendaz, one, two, three," they shout back.

"Mind up," he says last.

"Mind up," they repeat. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andréa Maria Cecil is a *CrossFit Journal* staff writer and editor.