

## **Michael Bellart**

Staff Writer

**After Aleksandr Kitsis moved to the United States 10 years ago, he felt like a child again.**

**The then 33-year-old knew little about American customs and spoke broken English. The ex-engineer lost his confidence. So he did what he was good at: He played chess.**

**Kitsis had been a master-ranked chess player since he was 16, when he won a state championship in his former home of Moldova, a country that was part of the former Soviet Union.**

**There the game was favored as excelling players' academic performance. Here it became a temporary crutch for his self-esteem. After he arrived, chess allowed him to beat other people and prove to them he wasn't stupid, he said.**

**Confidence is one of the benefits players receive from the game, the Mayfield Heights resident said. He believes chess helps players think more clearly, make better decisions, earn better grades and increase their memory retention.**

**It is this belief that has led Kitsis to push for inclusion of chess in public school curriculum. After being laid off from his previous job as an engineer, Kitsis decided to use his chess skills and build his own business.**

**"People who are masters in chess, there are probably only a few in the country," he said. "I can be a much bigger asset to people as an instructor in chess than as an engineer."**

**In June, he started his own company, Vivacity Inc., to accomplish this goal. Kitsis, a certified chess instructor, teaches chess classes to school-age children in Mayfield Village, Lyndhurst, Beachwood, Orange and Twinsburg. He also teaches adults.**

**But Kitsis wants to move his classes out of community rooms and into the classrooms. He points to required chess programs that school districts in New York City and New Jersey have adopted, in his opinion, successfully.**

**"If other people are getting the benefits of chess, why not Northeast Ohio or Cleveland?" Kitsis asked.**

**His plan is to start pilot chess programs in Cleveland-area school districts to prove that chess works as an academic tool. For the districts that accept, Kitsis' company would train the instructors and supply the equipment.**

**Area districts, however, have been lukewarm to the idea. Kitsis said many districts have concentrated too much on athletic development.**

**"By developing our intellectual ability, we would far outweigh our athletic achievement," he said.**

**He thinks evidence supports how beneficial it can be to students. He points to many studies showing the benefits of chess. According to information Vivacity provided:**

- **A study from the late 1970s by Dr. Yee Wang Fung indicated chess players showed a 15 percent improvement in math and science test scores.**

- In 1987 and 1988, sixth-graders in rural Pennsylvania who participated in chess lessons significantly improved in memory and verbal reasoning.
- A 1998-to-1992 study using 437 fifth-graders from Canada found increased gains in math, problem solving and comprehension proportionate to the amount of chess in a school's curriculum.

The Mayfield Village Recreation Department was one of Kitsis' first takers for an after-school program. It plays host to about two dozen students from grades one through six once a week in its community room.

Kitsis, a short, pear-shaped man, pops from table to table, eyeing his students' performance from behind thin-rimmed glasses.

He speaks with a prominent, but understandable, Russian accent, and habitually drops articles when speaking. He grins wryly when he jokes in class, which is often.

"No one wants to play you?" Kitsis smugly asked one boy sitting alone. "You should not win all your games."

Competition is important in the class, Kitsis said. It teaches children to win and lose in a controlled setting.

As Kitsis' company name suggests, the classes are lively. Most of the parents stay during the class. Some bring their younger children, who stumble through the room while the parents chat with one another.

All the activity doesn't mute the tap-tap-tap of chess figures being moved across a plastic board.

For the older students with chess experience, the class is spent playing the game, with instructors walking to each table, watching and giving tips.

Kitsis suggests students move multiple pieces at the beginning of the match.

"That way, your opponent will only have one piece moved, and you will have a whole army," he tells one student.

The games can get intense. One older student grips the frames of his glasses while staring intently at the board. His opponent just put him in check.

There is some trash-talking.

"Dumb," one boy announces after his opponent makes a poor move. He then takes his opponent's rook with his queen.

Kitsis' son, Victor, 14, helps along with two other instructors. Victor uses a checkered poster board on an easel and flat plastic chess pieces to teach the 6- and 7- year-olds how each piece is able to move.

Many parents stay during the 45-minute classes. They sign up their youngsters for different reasons.

One Mayfield Heights resident said he wanted his daughter, Priya, to learn the game so it would help her concentrate. He hadn't had much luck teaching her himself. "I know chess," he said. "But I find it difficult to teach my child. They do a good job here."

Another resident, Cindy Kennedy, started to teach her son, Trent, 7, but was limited by her knowledge of the game. "He knew chess coming in, but there was only so much I could teach him," she said while watching Trent play. "I think it' s really worthwhile for him to learn. And he loves it."

The children socialize after class. Priya, 6, brags about winning two games that day.

After 20 years as a chess coach and master, Kitsis said students sometimes surprise him. When he was teaching in his former country, a mediocre student approached him and asked to be included in the advanced classes. Because the student was persistent, Kitsis acquiesced, though he had reservations. After a year, the boy greatly improved in many of his school skills.

Kitsis said the boy' s grandfather later approached him and told him how the student' s skills had improved. Before, the grandfather said, "I used to let my grandson win. Now we play as equals and he beats me."

Kitsis said, "Within a year, that student built his character."

For more information about Vivacity' s chess programs, visit [www.vivacityinc.com](http://www.vivacityinc.com)

< News-Herald, Oct. 10, 2002