

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Olga Martynchuk

Interviewer: Julia Kanin

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/olga-martynchuk>

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This is the Coney Island History Project. This is Julia Kanin. And today we are talking with Olga Martynchuk, the mother of 22-year-old American professional boxer, Nikita Ababiy, whose nickname is White Chocolate. Olga and Nikita live in Sheepshead Bay. Good day, Olga.

Olga Martynchuk: Hello.

JK: What is the secret to raising a champion boxer?

OM: The secret to raising [one] is very simple: you have to be persistent. You have to have the right approach to what you want from your child, and what you want to see from him in the future. It is very important to spend all days with the child, to set a task, which is, first, to study at school, second, to go to college, and third, which is the core issue, is two or three practices a day. And to force, and to ask, and to blackmail, but in the end, to achieve the results we have achieved.

JK: Why did he choose boxing? How did it start?

OM: Nikita was a very fast boy. He climbed everywhere, protected girls. I was often called to school for his misbehavior. Well, he wasn't misbehaving, he was just protecting the weak. And I started thinking about how to use his gift of being a protector, a winner, and pacify him because America is a country of drugs. And I was very worried that he would get into bad company. And I started looking for a place to get him into.

The first place I got him in when he turned four was a swimming school. The results were tremendous. We were getting first prizes. In a year he achieved great results. But I was afraid that there would be swimming-related health issues. And I tried him in kickboxing. I dreamt about boxing, but since you can start boxing at 9, and he was only 6, I got him into kickboxing and jiu-jitsu. He was very successful in kickboxing: he became a Ring-Side champion, won all of the championships that there were. We had awards, we had trophies. And he also practiced jiu-jitsu. Jiu-jitsu is a sport with clothes and without. He achieved huge results: he was a champion. He always had first and second place. He never had third. And still, I was thinking about boxing. And when he turned 9, we got him into a boxing club. He was still practicing kickboxing though. We had awards. We didn't stop kickboxing workouts until he turned 12.

But from the age of 9 and to the present day, his whole life was boxing, which means two practice sessions a day, no rest, no breaks. The child couldn't breathe, he was saying, "Mom, I have no childhood, I've been training my whole life." And I was aware of that. There were too many workouts. The workouts were hard, two hours first, two hours the second, seven days a week.

We have been swimming from Brighton 1<sup>st</sup> to Brighton 15<sup>th</sup> from the rocks to the rocks. Meaning, from the spring and till the fall we had swimming sessions in the morning, practices on the sand.

Now he is already in professional boxing, we have signed a contract. He is already considered a new professional boxing star: he's very famous, very popular among the youth. People love him. Even when he had just started having his first fights, he already had a line to get his autograph. Six, seven, ten-year-old kids, boys and girls, were asking for his autograph. The girls were making jackets with his face pictured. He is Nikita White Chocolate. But he loves Naruto. And that's why all brand marks are related to Naruto because it was a little boy who turned into a winner and protected the whole world. And Nikita carries this image: his face, his hairstyle, it's all like Naruto. He went to PS 100 school, it's near Coney Island. We often went to Coney Island on Memorial Day because our grandfathers fought, protected, and we honor that. And whenever Nikita fights, he thanks his grandfathers and asks for their support before every fight.

JK: Was he interested in this sport from the get-go? Or did someone recommend it? Or did you just take him to boxing? Why this particular sport?

OM: To be honest, I was thinking in terms of finances. Because boxing was just developing, and the prospects for the future were big. If he graduated from college and became a doctor, he would have worked his whole life. It's different in boxing: you work, and if you become famous, you work until you're 30. Then you can retire, open your gym if you're a popular boxer. I decided it would be better for him in terms of a professional career than just struggling for 20 years, studying, studying, and then life can change one day, he might not like it. And I thought that boxing would be a great skill in life, he can always defend himself and anybody. He will be a very decent boxer. Boxers are always taught to be disciplined. It means he has no right to fight on the street. He has no right to get into any fights. It's the law of boxing. I mean, if you're a professional boxer or a beginner, yes, you're a good fighter, but you don't have to show your strength on the street. And just in perspective, I want my child to be rich, happy, famous, I decided to go into boxing for such selfish reasons.

JK: Was it hard for him to manage boxing and school?

OM: It was very hard to manage. Because he studied very well. He knows math. Even now he can multiply four-digit numbers in his mind. He can answer my question faster than I click on the calculator. He studied mathematics at IS 303. It is also located near Coney Island and Brighton. And he was a Sigma Elite in the math class when he was already a boxer. Everyone usually thinks boxers are stupid, they have no brains. But boxers are different now, it's a new generation. Boxers are very smart and talented. Besides, Nikita is working on his YouTube channel in addition to boxing. He makes funny videos and pranks that are very hilarious. He's very popular on YouTube as well. There are funny videos and pranks. He has more than 20 videos.

He is very knowledgeable. Even when he was a kid, he could assemble a building kit that I thought would take him a month or two, that he will be busy. But he assembled the kit in a day or two. And we were just buying new ones. It all depends on how you raise a child... As I always say, raising a child is akin to bringing up a dog. It is kindness, and affection, and a carrot, and a stick. I had everything combined. I was kind, fair, and angry, and confident... I was always saying,

"Nikita, you have to move forward. Boxing is your life." And he lived by that rule. He never resented that his mother took away his childhood. There are some interviews on YouTube, on some other channels. He is always grateful to his mom for who he became. "Thank you that you were strict with me sometimes."

We lived in a very small apartment. He slept on a bunk bed until 20 because we had one room, and I lived with my mother and daughter. And we lived in a very cramped, small apartment. He never resented that he lived like that. He accepted it. Because a lot of money was spent on travels for professional competitions. I spent a lot of money on hotels, his equipment, and training. The training was very expensive. So, if we invest in our children, they have to... Well, they don't have to, but we think that the child will understand it, and will work to give back. I mean, you'll never be a star if you don't have "I want and I will" in your head.

JK: Why is his name "White Chocolate"?

OM: White Chocolate is a very interesting name. I didn't like it because I wanted a more aggressive name. Because boxing is still a sport, not gentle figure skating. We were practicing in the gym where there were only Hispanic, Latino, and Blacks. Everyone loved him. Even when he was studying in Lincoln High School, as you know, it's a school where the majority of students are Black. They just adored him. And all his friends, he even listens to Black music. And they joked one day, Nikita is white, he has blond hair, green eyes, and everyone around him is Black. And someone said, "Oh, you are going to be white chocolate! We are dark chocolate, and you will be white chocolate." And this nickname White Chocolate stuck to him. And we kept it that way because we have a Hispanic coach, all of his coaches are Black. They are wonderful people, we love them all, they are our friends. They decided to name him White Chocolate. There is dark chocolate and white chocolate. It's a very funny story that he is embarrassed to tell because he doesn't like to divide Black, Latino, Mexican... He loves everyone, and everyone loves him. But somehow, he correctly explains that "I was the only white there, and the rest were Black. That's why they called me white chocolate."

JH: He hasn't lost a single fight, as far as I understand?

OM: Now we have had ten professional fights. And he won all of them. And we are striving to work harder and harder because Nikita is a unique kid. He has a peculiar appearance. And he stands out when he's in the ring. So, it's long blond hair, it's green eyes. He's not like all boxers. Usually, the boxers have a short cut, half-bald, they are... very simple, as we can say. And Nikita is very different. That's why he stands out. Sometimes people like it, sometimes people dislike it.

And it is even harder for him because he is so conspicuous. Because he needs to work more, more, and more. He doesn't have weekends. He asked, "Mommy, please give me at least a Sunday. Sunday is the day off." And since he's already a grown-up, I give him a day off on Sunday. He has two training practices a day, or gym. He runs in the morning, that's a must. A morning run, a workout, and he has to have sparring or a gloves practice in the evening.

JK: So, the work continues now?

OM: Every day. For example, if we have a fight, we have to wait for the next one for three months or four. It means these four months he continues working out. He has to lose weight. It's very hard work. First, it's a huge responsibility when you get in the ring because you're standing out. It's easier when athletes are not different from each other, it is easier for them. Because no one remembers them. Nikita has more than ten million views on YouTube. That's why... it's a big responsibility. Sometimes he is stressed because he gets tired, his arms, legs, shoulders hurt. He's like an old man. Even during the pandemic when there were no practices (everything was closed), we have been working out outside. We hired a coach, we have been training near the house because we couldn't do it inside, the neighbors would complain that the chandeliers are falling. And we have been training every day outside during the pandemic.

As soon as the gyms were opened, we immediately went to the gyms and began to train properly. He's got a coach, his name is Karston Andersen, he's like our family member. He trains with him. Nikita wouldn't be who he is without him. And we also have another coach, Sosa Adriano. He's our official coach. We are grateful to him because we got into a gym for kids supported by the New York Cops and Kids. They were opened in five boroughs: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Staten Island, so the kids with some family issues don't wander, don't do drugs. They were sponsoring clubs and we were training there free of charge every day. And also, if you studied well, you were given \$50 for the report card. It was a great incentive for the kids. And we were noticed because of this club. Meaning, that such famous boxers like De La Hoya wanted to sign Nikita. When he was performing at the Ring Side, the Silver Gloves, the Golden Gloves, Nikita became the Master Ring 2018. These are the 10 best boxers. They are awarded a gold diamond ring weighing 200 grams. And Nikita has this Master Ring title. There are few boxers like that because only the best are awarded with this title. You become the Master Ring for life. After having watched his fights when he won the Golden Gloves, the Silver Gloves, the Ring Side, De La Hoya, Harry Field wanted to sign him, but we chose an English company. It's a new company that signs the best and the coolest American boxers, even though it's from England.

When Nikita did a couple of professional fights, he got the T-shirts and VIP membership for life from the Barclays Center so he can attend all concerts, fights, and games. The head of the Barclays Center likes Nikita, he's a fan. He made him a VIP of the Barclays Center. Every boxer dreams of fighting at the Barclays Center. Mayweather fought once or twice; Nikita fought at the Barclays Center four times already. Every boxer has a dream to reach a certain level. Every boxer wants to fight at the Barclays Center. So, Nikita already fought a few times, and he is a VIP. He only needs to say his name, and he can go to any show. And we achieved it with sweat, blood, and mom's nerves. Mama is gray-haired, but I'm very proud and happy that my child understood everything, he's getting closer to his dream. He wants to grow, and grow, and grow. And now he is training a TikTok team that will be fighting YouTubers in Miami. He went there to train them.

JK: How does this transition to professional sport even take place? Because as far as I understand, he got awards when he was a schoolboy. And... should someone notice you? How does this even happen?

OM: Yes, as I just said, when these major fights happen, such as the Golden Gloves, the Silver Gloves, Ring Side, they are very important for every boxer. I forgot to tell you, Nikita was in a

national boxing team at the gym. He was a part of an American boxing team. He represented the U.S. national team, traveled to St. Petersburg, Uzbekistan, England. He was representing America as a member of an American national team. And when these important fights happen, agents are coming there. They always watch these fights. And I want to reiterate, Nikita is extraordinary: long blond hair. And when they see that the boxer is extraordinary... Nikita has a very fine technique: he fights with his left and right hands. It's very important for a boxer because boxers who are left-handed, they're very good, they win, they reach the top. Nikita can fight with left and right hands thanks to our coach. And when he performs during these competitions, agents always see it. And one day agents came, such as De La Hoya, Harry Field, they already wanted to sign us. But we chose different ones, those that we think are... Well, the thing is, many agents who sign you, they just sign and give fights. Our company is promoting Nikita: it means large billboards and press conferences. They present him to the people. They give such advertising that the whole world knows him: Nikita is known in China, in Ukraine, in Russia, in the Emirates, in England. Many fans around the world love him. YouTubers talk about him in Ukraine and China; those who watch his fights are in awe of how he fights. And he's too young! And he has such a technique.

I mean, it's just great when a company notices you, that there are producers, promoters who can sign you. It's not just a mom giving someone a hundred dollars or a thousand, "sign my son." It's hard work. As I always say: God sees everything, God rewards. And this is a reward, it's so wonderful that he was signed. It's not just a random coincidence. It's the work that we did together. I gave up a lot because of the cost of his different competitions like the Ring Side, the Gold Side, and all others... To win the Golden Gloves or the Silver Gloves, we had to go through the state fights, we had to go through about five or six stages to get to the finale on the Ring Side. And then you fight again, there are 150 people. You go through a lot of fights and levels. It 5-6 days to get to the final or the semi-final. A lot of people win, they get to the Golden Gloves final, but they lose the first day because these competitions last 5 or 6 days. One might have 2-3 fights, Nikita always had to fight from the beginning to the end of the week. On Saturday we have a finale, and then we pray whether he wins or not. It's very hard work. It's not only my work but also his work. And financially... Because I denied myself a lot, we never went to Mexico, we never went anywhere on vacation. The kid was always like, "Mom, why don't we go there?" And I tried to explain that I spend a lot of money on your competitions because if it's a hotel like Marriott, I can't book a hotel nearby, or book a very cheap Motel 6. I had to be in the Marriott and pay \$150-200 a night. And we had 5-6 nights. And we had a lot of expenses. But I always took him to Disney. Thanks to the competitions that were held in Florida sometimes. And I always took him to Disney after his competition as a reward. So, he went to Disney, he was everywhere. And since he's a grown-up now, he can travel the world. And every fight he thanks his mother, his coaches, who used a carrot and a stick. Well, now he's 22, he understands that this is his life, this is the bread that can give him all he wants.

Also, I would like to say that when we see world-known skaters, tennis players, kickboxers, swimmers who perform on television, on YouTube, in competitions, it is very, very hard work to get to this. Not everyone has such a career. This is just 10 people out of one million. I wanted to say that they work very hard before the fights. It means broken joints, torn ligaments, muscles. A child worked out hard today, and tomorrow he has to get up and do it again. Those children that

achieve great results work hard. It's so hard that it's a pity we don't see it on TV when there is a fight, or figure skating because they don't show how they train and get to the level that they are at. We see only the cream of the crop, we see the cherry on the cake, but we don't see this cherry ripening, struggling, sweating, crying. For real, these competitions, these victories, they are all achieved with blood and sweat. This is like Spartans, like Vikings, as I was always saying when he was small, "Nikita, you're a Viking, you have to win, and you have to go and fight." This is blood and sweat. These are Spartans. I wish everyone would watch a movie about Spartans and realize that our children in the sport that are famous now, or were, even if they are 20, but it's so hard. And nobody sees this work. Nobody can even understand, or imagine how hard it is. Only we, moms, dads, grandmothers, cry at night, we feel sorry for our children, but in the morning, we get up, we wake them up for practice, we fight with them, we make them go, train, and win. Because only the strongest wins.

JK: Is there any support from the state? Maybe when he was a kid? Or is this not the way it works in America?

OM: There was no support in America. I'll even tell you the case. When we had to go to St. Petersburg, Nikita had exams in high school. And we told the principal that we are on the American boxing team. We are going to represent America in the fight against other countries. It was an international competition. People were coming from France, Germany, all teams. And our USA. I gave them the letter from the team asking them to postpone his exam for a week. The principal didn't agree to move anything. And we got the grade lowered because he missed that time in school. So, the government, knowing that we represent the US, not just Brooklyn, but the whole US... It was a national team of kids from all states. And Nikita was among them. He fought in St. Petersburg, he fought in England. And all this time we were missing high school. And there was no support from the school. Even though I brought awards and letters. No support. The government didn't support [us] either. And as I said, I spent a lot of money. Because I had to be in that city and in that specific hotel. Expenses were colossal, from two thousand to five per fight. We had five to six fights per year. So, mama tried to save up, to borrow as best as she could. Everyone was helping. Thank God, the New York Cops and Kids Gym assisted with everything, clothes, sneakers that cost from \$300 to \$500, and our coach Sosa gave us clothes and gloves. Because it's important what gloves you use so that the child doesn't break his hands. Although Nikita has all his fingers broken. It's just a professional condition. They gave us proper sneakers. It all plays a big role. If a child gets the wrong sneakers and gloves, he breaks everything. And then you can forget about professional boxing. There was no support from the government. But thanks to the New York Cops and Kids, they assisted us a lot. Not only us but other boxers and kids. They gave us T-shirts, clothing, everything.

JK: What else is Nikita interested in? You mentioned YouTube.

OM: Yes, Nikita has loved Minecraft since childhood. He loved to assemble building sets, all sorts of LEGO. A normal person could assemble a LEGO that costs \$100-200 in two to three months. He assembled it in two to three days. I didn't know what to do. He was so passionate. He can ride a scooter. A bike, a scooter, tennis – he's so precocious! And he has a lot of friends. He guides them on what they need to do. We have no drug addicts, no alcoholics, no deadbeats among our

friends. All of his friends work or attend college. Now, of course, they have grown up and work, but, as I said, Nikita is very precocious. Swimming, golf... When he has a day off, he is not the kid who would just practice boxing, boxing, boxing. No, he is very versatile. He paints well. So, I thought he was going to make cartoons using computer graphics because he can do all of that. Now he has grown up and created his YouTube channel. He films and edits his videos himself. It's a very, very hard job. Not everyone can do that. So, he got himself a professional camera, he makes his videos himself. It's very hard to do. As I said, boxers are not stupid. You can bring up a very smart boxer, a boy, or a girl. And this is the way it works in any sport if a mother engages a child not only in sport or in studies. We allowed him to explore everything. I never scolded him for anything, I was always giving him a chance, "Ok, you can try it. If you can make it – okay, if not, then not." I always give a chance. I never forbid anything. He fancied photography for some time. I bought him a nice, expensive camera. He played with it and gave up. So, I never say "no, no, no," I always say, "Ok, you try it. See how it goes." And he achieved such great results with this motto "okay, you can try to do it." He is very versatile. And there is always something to talk to him about. And you can watch it on his YouTube channel White Chocolate, there are a lot of interviews. There is a lot about him, about what he likes and does.

JK: There is a mention in one interview that his grandfathers fought in World War II. You said he always remember that when you went to Coney Island on Memorial Day. Tell us a little about it.

OM: First of all, since it's 2021, we believe everyone who fought died a long time ago. Because they went to war at the age of 16. One grandfather became a captain at 21. At 21 years to achieve such a rank, and stay alive, to make it to Berlin, and to win, and to live here till the end! It plays a very big role in the upbringing of children, too. And Nikita was always proud that they were alive, that they fought, that they... We've been talking about the war since he was a kid. We tell about what the Fascists did to people. I talked about it. I showed some movies. I showed history. I was telling and supporting all these traditions. By the way, Nikita speaks Russian and writes. Even though he was born in America, he speaks Russian perfectly without an accent, writes, and reads. This is a very rare thing nowadays. He believes that those grandfathers who fought are his guardian angels because he considers himself a warrior.

JK: How and when did you come to America? You mentioned that the grandfathers moved in, as I understand it?

OM: Well, my grandfathers moved to America because my mother divorced... There were divorces, and America was considered a country... we were considered traitors. And it was all classified, it was forbidden to disclose who left... And I decided to move because it was the 90s. Life was very hard. Everything changed. It was very, very hard. And I just said, "Mom, I want to live in America." I don't know why, but I saw America as a country that could give me all I hadn't had. When I came here, I found my grandfathers, of course. I got acquainted with them. I was given full support. And I stayed. I love Brooklyn, I love Coney Island. Every weekend we are going to the amusement park. When the hurricane hit, my child cried because every Saturday we had been going to see the dolphins. We had been going to the Aquarium. And we were shocked when the dolphins and everything perished; we were very upset that this happened. But thank

God, even after the hurricane, the memorial monument remained. It didn't even move. We went on purpose to see whether the monument remained, and it did.

JK: And how did you survive this hurricane?

OM: I would say we handled it well. We lived on the second floor. And all the neighbors from the first floor and the basement lived in our apartment. We had a young pioneer camp, as in the old days. We were sleeping together on the same beds. So, our apartment turned into a shelter for all survivors. We donated all the clothing, T-shirts, underwear, socks, to the people who needed them. Fortunately, I filled up the gas, even though I didn't know what would happen. I didn't believe the hurricane would be so strong. I just refueled the car. And we were just collecting people, rescuing those who lived in the basements nearby. Our apartment turned into a communal living. We had no electricity for 10 days. No hot water. We had no cold or hot water. One young girl had a baby, and we all slept on the floor, or beds in our one-bedroom apartment in Brighton. Yeah, we had a really good time. And thanks to this hurricane, we got closer because there were not only Russians who suffered, but also Americans. I think we need to help each other, and sometimes I'm acting like Mother Teresa. My Nikita scolds me sometimes because he says, "Mom, you're so kind, and you get nothing in return." It's probably in my blood because I was brought up this way – you have to help, you have to understand, and you have to carry everything through yourself. And I'm trying to raise Nikita and my daughter in this fashion, so you have to carry it through your heart. Just ask yourself, would you do that to yourself? And that's why I bring up children this way. And I don't demand anything in return. So, my children try to live like we were raised as Komsomols, little Octobrists, Communists. I'm living by the same rules because those rules were good. You are responsible for those you have tamed, and you have to be responsible for your actions.

JH: Did you move to Coney Island right away? Or had you been living in some other place in America or Brooklyn?

OM: I settled in Bay Ridge at first. And I hadn't known for a year that there was a Russian community. And I accidentally... I was accidentally told that there was Brighton, Coney Island, and I quickly moved to Coney Island. And when I saw Russian grandmothers, Russian grandfathers... God, I wanted to talk to them and hug them so badly! We had been talking on the street for half an hour. I had been meeting people, talking to them. Everyone thought I was crazy. And I just missed them so much. And I've been living on Coney Island for more than twenty-four years.

JK: And how do you remember Coney Island when you first saw it?

OM: How? It was just like home! Everything was so dear to me. It's like you haven't moved anywhere. It's all the same. Even the same grandmothers who gossip on the bench, discussing who went by. It's all the same. That's why I'm loving it. I love it when my kids are being watched. I come and they already tell me: Nikita was over there; Nikita did this and that. I love that very much.

JK: How do you see Coney Island in a few years?



OM: I really want the area to be greener, to have more planted trees. Because there are little trees, very few plants there. I would like to see more events, more contests for grandparents so that they do not forget that they are still alive, and they are loved, and they are taken care of. There were some contests near the monument. Now it's all closed. I wish we had some... Well, so every Sunday people are away, "Oh, it's Sunday, there will be something." I want children and adults performing, grandmothers singing songs, dancing. Everyone can take part in this. I want to tell you one thing. When we lived on Coney Island, on Brighton 3<sup>rd</sup>, my street was empty. Not a single tree. I called 311 and ordered the trees. And if you walk there now, all the trees were planted there thanks to me. And no one knows about it. But I want to brag about it.

JK: They will know now!

OM: For real, I called and said, "You know, we have this very beautiful street, but not a single tree." And I was shocked because in two weeks they came and planted the whole street with trees. And I want to ask everyone who lives on Coney Island, around Coney Island. If you see that you don't have any trees, just call and the Green Brooklyn service will come and plant trees all over your street. No one wants to do anything, they're too lazy to move their behind, pick up the phone, and call to make the street nicer. Even though they would do it, and I didn't get the word "no," but they could have put up a plaque "These trees are planted thanks to Olga Martynchuk."