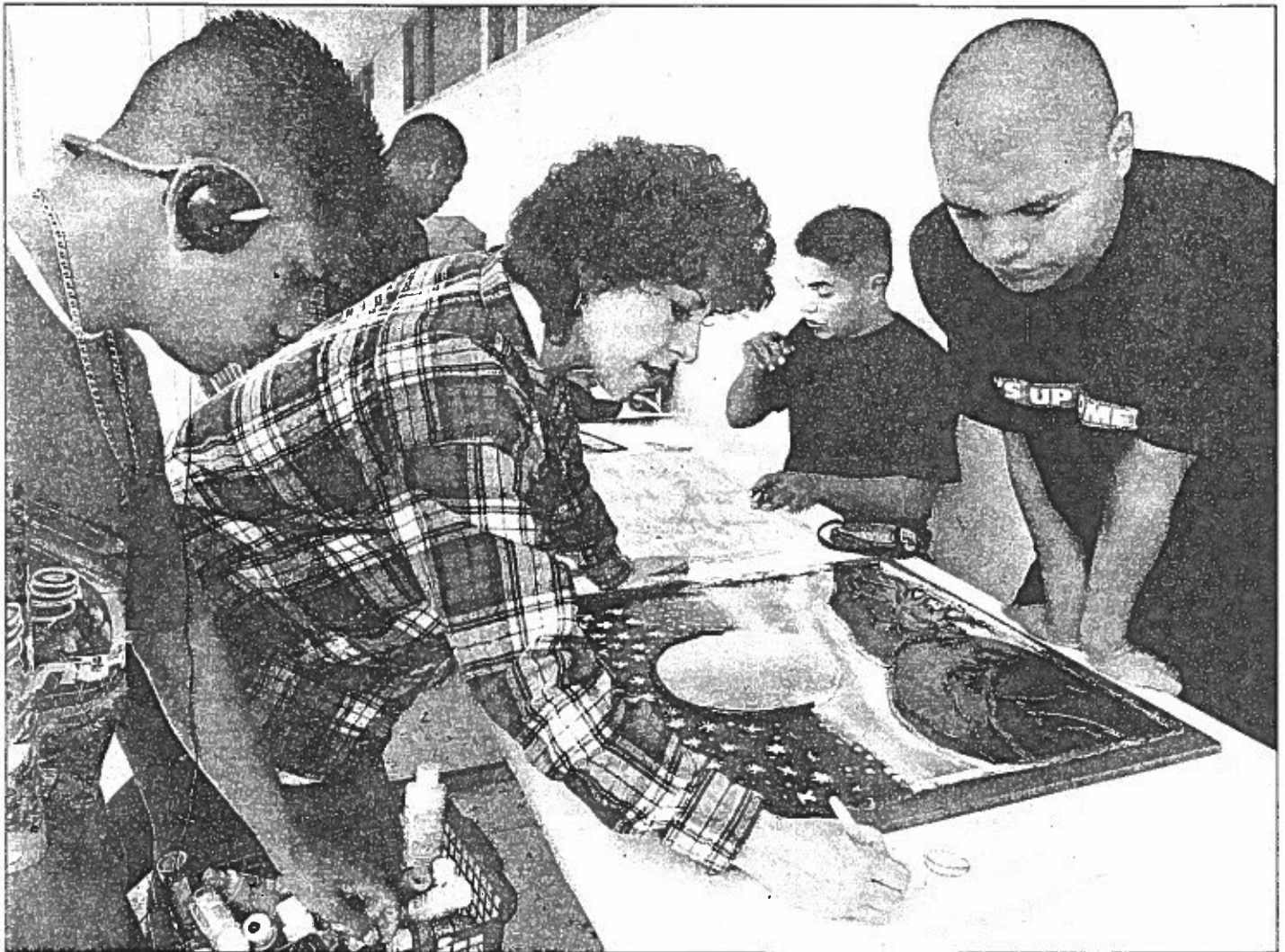


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School Makes Heroes of Troubled Teens



Photos by IRFAN KHAN / Los Angeles Times

Muralist Joni Herman helps Oscar Maldonado, 16, left, and Nick Garcia, 18, with one of their projects at Santiago Creek School.

Failure no longer colors Eric Arevalo's identity.

For five years, the 17-year-old spray-painted freeway overpasses from Orange County to San Francisco with his moniker, Fale, chosen because the Santa Ana youth had felt like a failure all his life. Now he works with canvas and clay, creating seascapes, masks and watercolors through the art program at Santiago Creek School in Santa Ana.

The alternative school, whose students also mentor disabled children and feed the homeless, won an award from the county's Human Relations Commission for helping bridge the gap between students and the community and for helping build the teens' self-esteem.

The 50 students at county-run Santiago Creek, the only alternative school to win the commission's Bridges Award, have been removed from mainstream middle and high schools for academic and emotional problems. Many live in foster homes or have been abused, and some are on probation, school officials said.

"These aren't bad kids; they just need redirection," said teacher Cyndie Borcoman. "So many are lost until they come here."

The county commission founded the Bridges program in 1988 to create a social-justice curriculum at mainstream and alternative schools throughout the county.

Fifty-two schools participate. Santiago Creek applied to the program two years ago and established its charity programs with the commission's support.

The art that students create at the 5-year-old school can provide a release for troubled youngsters' anger and, in some cases, has turned their lives around, officials said.

Nick Garcia was not involved in art before enrolling in Santiago Creek. As he worked with volunteer Joni Herman one recent morning, shading perspective into a pastel moon, he talked about a future that includes studying art at Santa Ana College after graduating this month. "I was a menace when I was a little boy," said Garcia, 18, of Santa Ana. "But now, even if I'm just painting turtles or something, it gets my mind off of all those violent emotions."



Hector Barranco, 15, at work. The county's Human Relations Commission has honored his school with a Bridges Award.

Through the school's outreach programs, Garcia has traveled to Corona del Mar to mentor disabled teens and served food to the homeless at a Santa Ana shelter. The experiences made him feel needed for the first time in his life, he said.

"I'd never gone somewhere that people even wanted me to be around, but at those places, people needed my help," he said.

"They weren't judging me, calling me a thug or a loser. They wanted to share their lives with me."

When Garcia and a dozen other Santiago Creek boys, all Latinos with shaved heads and baggy pants, walked into the Newport Beach YMCA two months ago in a mostly white, middle-class neighborhood, the desk staff appeared less than thrilled, students and school officials agreed.

But when the boys presented an 8-by-60-foot seascape to beautify the pool area, they erased the stereotypes society tends to have about alternative-school students, said Jon Voget, the Central Orange Coast YMCA's executive director. Borcoman proposed

the mural last year to YMCA officials, who chose the Newport Beach location.

"The kids that came are not your typical artists," Voget said. "I had been a little bit concerned about how the mural would look, but we were pleasantly surprised by how much time and care the youth took to do really nice work."

Eliminating prejudices is one of the Bridges program's goals, said Rigo Maldonado, a county human-relations specialist who works with Santiago Creek. School officials are proposing a mentorship program at the Santa Ana shelter, in which students would create art with the homeless.

"It builds the kids' self-esteem because they stop thinking of themselves as screwed-up and unwanted and start perceiving themselves as heroes."

The other schools chosen for this year's Bridges award are Fullerton Union High School; Savannah High School in Anaheim; Kraemer Middle School in Placentia and Orangethorpe Elementary in Fullerton.

Each winner received a plaque, a county Board of Supervisors proclamation and \$500.

Santiago Creek's art program has helped students such as Arevalo find avenues for their aggression.

All of Arevalo's creations—still-life fruit sculptures trimmed with dingy bricks, desert paintings with nails protruding from a cactus—reflect his love of evil, he said.

"Evil represents me," said Arevalo, who has sold some of his works through local galleries. "But now I don't feel so hopeless, such a failure, because the school has shown me how to use these feelings to do something that supports my family, rather than get me busted."

Arevalo and other students are working on another mural for the Newport Beach YMCA that features wildlife. Art instructor Lisa Albert asks the students to keep some of their darker feelings out of work that will be donated, but said that as long as students master the basics, such as perspective and proportion, they can do as they please with their private work.

"I'm not here to judge or confine them," said Albert, a Newport Beach artist. "They need structure, but they also need freedom of expression more than most students."