

A Premium on Studying

Homework Club helps students gain edge in classroom, life

By David Zimmerle

Hispanic and Latino students at Las Palmas Elementary School and San Clemente High School continue to break through cultural and community barriers one homework assignment at a time.

With Las Palmas' location in the territory of a gang injunction, and high school students facing their own separate issues, it's easy for students at all levels to fall victim to a cycle of violence on the streets—torn between a commitment to their education both in and out of the classroom, and fighting the temptation of becoming yet another uneducated and negative statistic in society.

However, with the unrelenting guidance and support of Orange County Human Relations, its BRIDGES Program, a host of retired teachers and other community volunteers, students are beginning to reap the benefits of an after-school homework club dedicated to completing homework assignments and strengthening core educational values.

When the final bell rings and students exit school halls for the day, many can gather for one of two sessions in a room at Mary Erickson Community Housing, located at 150 West Escalones in San Clemente.

Almost a full year has passed since the club's inception and the students have made strides in their approach to learning. "This all started last February with a few kids and some volunteers and has grown into something now where we have 35-45 kids coming to our weekly sessions," Rose Velasquez, a staff member of Orange County Human Relations and key organizer of the homework club, said. "(Orange County Human Relations) received grant money last year to work in the Las Palmas area and the big issue coming out of here was that kids were not getting enough help with their homework."

Currently, the site offers two sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays and has six tutors who rotate schedules. The first session involves elementary school students while the second focuses more on middle school and high school students. The success and growing numbers of the club has also led to a possible expansion of the location, and though mostly Hispanic and Latino children attend, all kids are welcome.

Several youth clubs have also branched off from these study groups and are becoming more involved in the community. Some have even helped shape city policy by working with city employees on a safe rides to school grant, which they received back in September. Others have been attending adult support meetings while even going so far as to help elders with their yard work on the weekends.

"This is also a program that is here to help kids build a better self-esteem and encourage volunteer work in the community,"

Velasquez said. "We've gotten a great response from parents and teachers, and on an academic level, the kids' grades have increased dramatically in the last year."

"What we're seeing now is that more kids are becoming actively involved in their school, in sports and in the community, and other kids want to follow that example." —Rose Velasquez

Many of the problems that students who attend the homework club face, Velasquez maintains, is that their parents are working much longer hours during the day, struggling to provide for their families in the face of a tough economy, as the students continue to struggle with their own cultural identity.

"All of these things," Velasquez said, "contribute to negative stereotypes that the kids must face along with the question of where they actually fit within society. In the long run, it's easy for them to become confused as to who they are."

But the Homework Club identifies these issues with the answer that has provided many of the other underprivileged in society their opportunity to rise above their raising—a dedicated approach to gaining a solid education.

The Homework Club is always looking for volunteers to help tutor the students for their after-school program. Anyone interested should contact Rose Velasquez at 949.212.7423. **SC**