High schoolers taking step up with social work; Class puts youths in college mindset

San Diego Union-Tribune - Monday, April 5, 2004
Author: Lisa Petrillo

Elizabeth Villeda lives in a poor inner-city neighborhood, and for her that can be an advantage.

Elizabeth has been recruited by San Diego State University into a program that lets local inner-city teens earn their way into college while helping their neighborhood as well.

The program is sort of an ROTC for social work, the creation of a community organizer turned SDSU professor, Michael Eichler, based on the theory that who better to help fix what is troubling a neighborhood than those who live there.

For Elizabeth, college was just a hazy idea until now. After only a few weeks of social work, her confidence that she can make it in college and beyond is growing.

"You know, people have a lot of problems. I'm not an expert but I have experience in things," she said.

Twice a week, Elizabeth and 17 Hoover High classmates ride a bus from the City Heights campus to SDSU, where they take Social Work 102, a college-level class taught by professor Eichler.

The distinction of delivering a bona fide college experience is important, Eichler said.

"You've got just a few weeks to overcome a lot of barriers with these kids, to convince them that they can go to college, they do belong in college, they can find the money (to go) and they can do the work," he said.

Already they are showing they can do college-level work.

As part of their class project, Elizabeth and her classmates created and are running a grass-roots, community-based program: the Hoover Helping Hands, providing after-school tutoring for children in The Village Townhomes in City Heights.

After four years and 140 graduates, the program Eichler calls Step Up claims a 95 percent success rate in getting its students through high school, into college and keeping them there.

It is not miracles but hard work that brings success, Eichler said. "Class doesn't change the world. You gotta grind away at it."

The barriers can be steep for inner-city youths trying to make the leap into higher education.
Mina Nyugen of City Heights credits Step Up with giving her the push she needed.

"I thought I wasn't smart enough to go to college," said Nyugen, who never dreamed she'd make it as far as she has, now finishing her junior year at SDSU.

A refugee camp

Nyugen was born in an Indonesian refugee camp to a Vietnamese mother and a father she never knew. Her mother eventually settled in City Heights and worked as a maid and sewed piecework to support herself and three children.

For Nyugen, 21, the pressure never has let up, despite the many hurdles she has cleared with the help of Step Up: realizing that she could go to college, getting help with the paperwork, finding the grants and loans and then, once at SDSU, keeping her grades up so she doesn't lose her scholarships.

She feels as if she should get a job to help the family, but culturally, her inner conflict continues.

"My mother believes in the old ways, that Asian girls live at home. The only way out is to marry," Nyugen said.

She remains closely linked to Step Up, still getting counseling from the more experienced students and volunteering in the office to help the younger students on their way up.

Once students are in school, the program tracks their progress and helps them stay in school. While the hope is that their early experience with social work will interest them in a career, they can major in whatever they desire.

Eichler calls Step Up "building a talent pipeline," a program that replenishes itself and helps students at the same time it helps them learn how to better the neighborhood.

"Why has nobody done this before? Because it's a lot of work," Eichler said. "This takes a long time, instead of some flashy event where you declare victory and walk away."

He credits Price Charities, his main donor, for having patience and providing an estimated $100,000 over three years.

The money pays his salary and that of his graduate students, college tuition, books and transportation costs for the Hoover students and other high school students in the program, plus the counseling for students.

Help from Price

Price Charities, founded by retail magnate Sol Price, has invested millions of dollars in revitalization efforts in City Heights and in the education collaborative with SDSU, which works with three public schools in the neighborhood in an effort to raise academic levels.
It didn't take years, but only weeks for changes in the world of teenager Maximino Avila.

As Eichler lectured recently on the history of social work, Maximino's head drifted toward his desk. The spike-haired Hoover junior is the first to admit that his grades are not what they should be.

"I'm not really an `A' person. I always come up short," Maximino said.

But once he was in the field applying the lessons learned from class, he was unstoppable.

First he was helping a young boy with his fractions homework, then playing the board game Sorry with another child in the community room at the Townhomes, then consulting with another on what in the world the teacher meant by assigning an essay on what a space alien might look like.

Until now, college and a social work career were not even on his radar.

"I've never thought about any of this before. So far, it's shown me some interesting things about the human psyche," Maximino said.

Elizabeth, too, has been motivated by her work. Perhaps social work will be the career for her, she said, "After college."

She clearly likes saying that phrase, and its assumptions, that there will be college and, eventually, graduation.

Lisa Petrillo: (760) 737-7563; lisa.petrillo@uniontrib.com

Caption: 3 PICS
1. The Step Up program through San Diego State University gives high school students like Hoover High junior Emmanuel Rodriguez a chance to prepare for college and improve his neighborhood through social work. 2. Besides helping elementary students like Rosa Parks first-grader Gerardo Junior Morales study his homework, Hoover High juniors Marcellus Walton and Joanna Guitierrez get into the college mindset and improve their neighborhood. 3. Hoover High junior Leticia Avila helped Mariana Ramirez, 7, with her math homework in the Step Up program, created by San Diego State University professor Michael Eichler. (B-4)

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