In a section of City Heights that hipsters know as a busy divider between "The Pit" and "The Park," you don't have to be a street-wise kid like Cesar Borja to know that the place can gobble up unsupervised youngsters in a flash.

A stretch of El Cajon Boulevard between 54th Street and Euclid Avenue is the main drag and the northern boundary of "The Pit," which encompasses a patchwork of back alleys and stucco-lined side streets extending south toward Landis Street.

Thirteen-year-old Borja and his pals know well the area generally described once by a dope-smoking prostitute, who called herself the "Rock (as in rock cocaine) Star," as a place where 'you don't do nothin' but date for drugs, stay awake and stay high."

"The Park," which derives the name from its proximity to Balboa Park, is anything but, a fellow known on the streets as the prince of pimps once assured.

Borja and other kids agree, for they know the reality. This piece of El Cajon Boulevard, and many of its byways between Texas and 35th streets, are rendezvous for hookers and tricks. And, like "The Pit," it is fertile ground for pugnacious street gangs.

The buffer between these two frightful zones is the neighborhood where Borja lives and attends Wilson Academy in the 3800 block of Orange Avenue.

But unsavory characters often converge here, too, bringing with them some of the antisocial junk from "The Pit" and "The Park."

"There aren't many (parks or playgrounds) around here where kids can go and be safe from gangs and other stuff," says Borja, a bright, intuitive eighth-grader. "It's really bad around here for kids after school.

"A lot of kids' parents work and (children) don't have anyone around to keep them out of trouble."

But they do have the library at Wilson.

Kids, who want to avoid the grip of the streets and have fun improving their minds, gather here every day after school.

They participate in a program, once called Ex Libris, but now better known as After's Cool.
This is a voluntary project offering kids a relaxed, no-pressure atmosphere in which they can get immersed in so-called "boring stuff" like homework, reading, writing and the arts.

After's Cool is linked with several City Heights community improvement efforts such as the pilot Project ArtNet, which promotes cohesion in the multiethnic enclave through practical application of art and the humanities.

The school project gets youngsters involved with community people who are building up, not tearing down. It also helps develop talents some thought they never had.

Sadly, like most in the educational realm these days, the school program is financially threatened. So, directors Michael Arata and David Engbritson remain in constant search of benefactors.

They know it's a good cause. On any given day, it's clear that their charges have found a sense of purpose and self-worth.

And that's at the core of why kids recommend the program to other kids.

And why 600 or more sixth- through eighth-graders have passed through the program in its three years.

But it's more than something to do that pulls kids into the library.

"It doesn't matter what race or religion you are," says Karla Jimenez, a seventh-grader. "It's like a family here."

Adds eighth-grader Monica Hugle: "I love it here. I've improved my writing skills and I've learned that giving and helping" are the best ways to overcome the bad influences.

Caption: 1 PIC
Enthusiastic: Three students who've received much inspiration from the After's Cool program are (from left) Alex Sanchez, Karla Jimenez and Monica Hugle. Union-Tribune / RONI GALGANO
Edition: 1,2,3,4
Section: LIFESTYLE
Page: E-1
Column: Making It
Index Terms: CHILDREN ; FINANCE ; LITERATURE ; NEIGHBORHOODS ; RECREATION ; SCHOOLS
Record Number: UTS1060902
Copyright 1993, 2007 Union-Tribune Publishing Co.

***Reproduced with permission granted by San Diego Union-Tribune***
Full-text obtained via NewsBank