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TIMES HOLIDAY CAMPAIGN

Center offers tutoring, leadership training and role models for kids

BY CARLA HALL
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On a recent chilly fall day, the Mar Vista Family Center was a whirling vortex of all the constituencies that Lucia Diaz, who oversees the mix, has vowed to help.

In one building, elementary- and middle-school students polished off a meal before being tutored. On the other side of the dead-end street — a cozy Culver City cul-de-sac that Diaz has claimed for the center — pre-teen girls chatted and laughed at tables in a big classroom. In another room, young staffers and volunteers helped high-schoolers prepare for the SATs.

And inside her office, with its cheery lime-green walls and dozens of photos of smiling children, Diaz suddenly looked up from a conversation to see a young man in red shorts and a T-shirt, sweating, breathless, begging for water. Within seconds it became clear he hadn't come in from a soccer game. He was being chased and had ducked in to hide. Overhead, a police copter droned continuously.

"Lucia, can I just sit here?" A husky bear of a young man, the 20-year-old sounded more like a

little boy.

She let him sit while someone fetched him water. She eyed him. "You know, the police will come," she said calmly.

Within minutes, Diaz had alerted the staffers across the street, who locked their doors. Shortly after, LAPD officers arrived, questioned the man and led him in handcuffs to a police cruiser on the street. An ice cream wagon's melody wafted through the air.

"I don't know him that well," Diaz said of the young man. "We try to work with a lot of them."

Some change. Some don't. But Diaz's overriding mission is to offer a pathway that veers away from the kind of activity that brings the police in pursuit.

"This is something kids in our community are exposed to," she said. "They see gangs and drugs being sold. That's why we're here — so they have a place to come. Our hope is they get to see they have other choices."

In the 30 years since the center opened as a preschool for low-income children, it has metamorphosed into a sprawling collection of programs for preschoolers, preteens, youths — particularly those in danger of getting into trouble — and even adults in the community. The By Youth For Youth program serves at-risk people age 13 to 21. It provides peer mentoring, college preparation and leadership workshops.

Many of the teens, who go

through the program go on to supervise activities for younger children. The center's educational coordinator, Jesus Orozco, is an alum of the center and a graduate of UC Berkeley.

The center has programs for kids of all ages.

On Friday, children can take a dance class. On Saturday, there's a dance class for teens; merengue and salsa are on the agenda right now.

There's a waiting list for all the programs.

The center prides itself for having taken over the grassy cul-de-sac at the end of a street that was once the roost of gang members, drug dealers and prostitutes, Diaz said.

However, the people who run the center firmly believe they cannot shut out members of the community if they truly want to participate. Diaz has employed gang members to work on various construction projects for the center.

"You may not like the behavior of every member of the family — but they're still family," said Diaz, the center's chief executive.

The late Betty Factor, Rena Ellis and June Payne started the center and learned quickly that "they needed to involve the whole community," Diaz said. She arrived at the center in 1981 as a mother of three children who went through the program. Once a cleaning woman, Diaz, now 49, earned teaching and school administration creden-

tials, and moved up the ranks.

Her walls are lined with city and state commendations for the center and a photo of then-First Lady Hillary Clinton dropping by for a visit. In the adjacent office is Diaz's daughter, Blanca, 29, who has a master's degree in social work and is a youth coordinator.

In the room where the pre-teen girls have gathered, 16-year-old Laura Gonzalez — a former program member, now a paid preteen leader — is questioning the girls about the afternoon's events.

"When the helicopters were overhead, what was the first thing that rushed through your head?"

"I thought someone had gotten shot," said Leslie De Loera, 10.

"When I heard the helicopters, I said let's go and see what happened," said Alondra Rodriguez, 10.

"OK, did you hear what she said?" Gonzalez asked. "Is that a safe thing?"

"NOOOO!!" the chorus responded.

These girls are no strangers to odd activities in the streets, and they discuss them with a mix of nonchalance and giggles.

"What are some of the things we do when we're scared?" Gonzalez asked.

"I would get a broom. Then I would take my dog, because I love my dog, and I'd get under the bed," Alondra said.

Soon the conversation turned to other topics: Are you an only child? Do you want to go to college? And everyone had something to say.

"They see us more like role models or like their brothers and sisters," said Gonzalez, an 11th-grader at Venice High School who hopes to attend UC Santa Barbara. "We make them feel like their problems are similar. When they feel isolated, their attitude is down. I'll say, 'you want to talk about it?' I like encouraging them."

The nonprofit organization, which is supported by grants and donations, has almost all the funds it needs to start construction in December on a \$6.3-million youth center, which will allow more children to be served and will remove the burden of using the preschool room as a youth center. The Times' Holiday Fund gave \$25,000 this year to support the center's youth programs.

Diaz recently talked with the young man who begged her for water that afternoon. He is not in police custody. If he can make a commitment and keep Diaz's ground rules, she might allow him to work on the new construction.

"He knows he needs to put his act together," Diaz said.

The annual Holiday Campaign is part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund, a fund of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which this year will match

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