

Using Photography to Curb Violence

Six young people deemed high-risk to join gangs will display their photos in a San Fernando exhibit.

By Samantha Tata and Azalea Iniguez



Rodrigo Lopez

Six students ranging in age from 10 to 15 are displaying their photography as part of El Nido Family Centers' Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) program in Pacoima.

Los Angeles has been dubbed America's gang capital, but a Southland non-profit organization has dedicated their mission to divert young people from perpetuating that identity using creative mediums.

Six at-risk youth from Pacoima will display the work they've created through El Nido Family Center's photography program Thursday night from 5 - 8 pm at 418 North Maclay St. in San Fernando.

"(The camera) is like my sword and my armor," said photography student Roberto Lopez. "I use it to express myself."



Lopez said he almost joined a gang in sixth grade because he was being bullied and had low self-esteem, but his participation in the El Nido program has steered him away from that lifestyle.

"I feel really good about myself, like I can do anything," he said.

Ranging in age from 10 to 15, participants worked with photographers Robert Chasin and Richard Doran to learn the intricacies of photography using a digital SLR camera donated by El Nido.

The class covered shutter speed, aperture, composition, how to manipulate lighting and how to edit photos on the computer, Doran said. Students personally framed their gallery submissions.

The photographs will be available for purchase, with 60 percent of the donation-based proceeds going directly to the artist. The remaining 40 percent will be used to buy supplies for future photography classes, which Doran hopes will become a permanent fixture.

The summer program runs for 14 weeks, while the fall schedule calls for a shorter program.

Doran, a retired school teacher, was documenting a mural project sponsored by El Nido when students expressed interest in his camera and taking photos themselves. He said his line of work has brought him together with marginalized youth and inspired him to continue that relationship.

Doran said when he prompted the students to take portraits, none of them wanted to be in front of the camera, but rather turned the lens toward their case workers.

"Photography allows (the kids) to present their vision of the world to others, and gives them a sense of self-worth," he said. "They think, 'What I'm doing counts and matters.'"

One student in the photography program was interviewed by a local television station before returning to the gallery where his art was on display.

"His smile seemed to say, 'This has been a great day for me,'" Doran said. "He was beaming."

Two hundred youth have passed through El Nido's Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) program since it opened in 2008. Kids usually do not know who nominated them for the program, but the recommendation could come from the county, local police department or teachers.

El Nido determines a child's risk-level for gang violence using a tool developed at the University of Southern California, said Margie Guzman, GRYD program director.

Risk factors include weak parental supervision, justification of negative behavior, association with or participation in delinquent behavior, and critical life events such as death, violence and abuse.

While Guzman said formal results have not yet been published, the same tool used to determine program eligibility is also being used to quantify success, and so far it's looking good.

About 150 of the 200 members of the GRYD program have stayed with the center for over a year and counselors have noticed positive changes in their school relations, grades, the way they dress and their relationship with their parents, Guzman said. Mentees begin to develop and define long-term goals and change their peer group.

GRYD, which receives funding from the Los Angeles Mayor's office, has recently sustained a 10 percent cut from their \$1 million budget, causing them to pick and choose which programs they should keep.

"It's limiting us from doing more youth development activities," said Margie Guzman, GRYD program director. "We're trying to keep our staff but extra things, like the theatre and photography programs, now depend on volunteers."