

Mentoring Youth4Youth

By Andrea E. Garcia



It's shortly after school hours and the sound of laughter echoes throughout the play yard at Wardlaw Elementary in Vallejo.

Several students are playing basketball; others are climbing bright-colored jungle gyms, occasionally falling onto the darkened bark chips.

Toward the back of the school, nestled by several manicured hills, 11-year-old Danielle gets ready to play Double-Dutch – another form of jump rope that began in the inner cities of America. She waits her turn, counts the beat, and jumps in. But it isn't long before Danielle misses a jump and is out. She laughs and takes her place in line, all over again.

Not too long ago, Danielle's reaction would have been different. She would not have laughed, nor would she have bowed out so gracefully. She attributes this new approach to Youth4Youth, a mentoring program provided by the nonprofit agency, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the North Bay (BBBS).

"I just like it here. They mostly help me with my problems," Danielle said candidly, who is now in her third year of the program. "Instead of hitting when I get angry or use violence, I use my words."

The program, implemented in Solano County in 2007, serves students who come from a variety of backgrounds, some of which may include having academic challenges; struggling with peer relationships, being in the foster care system, or coming from single-parent and economically disadvantaged households.

Youth4Youth provides weekly peer mentoring services at after-school sites, such as at Wardlaw, Fairview Elementary, Markham Elementary, and Travis Air Force Base Youth Center. During a two-hour window, high schoolers mentor elementary and middle school students in an array of activities, including sports, education, or just playing board games. This, in turn, helps the younger students to build self-confidence and security in knowing that they have a dependable friend and advocate.

It is a model taken from the program's original sites in Marin and Napa and addresses the need to increase community engagement and volunteerism to work with youth, such as mentoring.

"The younger children are happy to have someone spend time with them, a one-on-one time," said Hege Fan, the Youth4Youth Coordinator at Wardlaw Elementary. "It's a good place to have someone older, where they try to look up to them. They have conversations that are encouraging."

For Kyanna, a 16-year-old student from Jesse Bethel High School who mentored Danielle, the program fits her niche.

“I like being around kids and helping people out,” she said, as she played on the jungle gym with Danielle. “I thought it was a good program when I found out about it at a college fair. I’m a big sister to Danielle and I like it.”

In 2009, Youth4Youth in Solano County served 236 teens and youth. A survey by Big Brothers Big Sisters showed mentees’ class behavior, participation, and academic performance jumped between 86 to 100 percent better, demonstrating the difference a mentor can make in a child’s life.

“The Youth4Youth program in Solano not only benefits young children in need of mentoring services, it also provides teens with the opportunity to take on meaningful roles and make positive contributions in their community,” said Cyndi Weingard, Director of Development for Big Brothers Big Sisters of North Bay.

To help sustain the program, Youth4Youth depends on a variety of donations and grants, including one recently received from Solano Community Foundation’s Nonprofit Partnership Program (NPP) – created in 2009 to strengthen, develop and serve Solano County nonprofits.

Awarding its first grant of \$5,000, NPP focused on Vallejo to address and identify the highest issues facing the city. Through a survey distributed to residents of Vallejo, followed by a facilitated community conversation, results showed the highest priority for Vallejo residents to be education, such as an availability of afterschool programs. And these programs help to make a difference.

The results of a survey conducted by the California Healthy Kids Survey in Fall 2007 showed that 27 percent of Vallejo fifth-graders reported that they have tried alcohol at least once and 29 percent of them think that alcohol is a “little bad” versus “very bad.”

The mentoring program at Wardlaw Elementary is helping to change this and reflects the purpose of NPP’s first grant. For this reason, Youth4Youth was awarded a \$5,000 grant to address the community’s concern about the quality of education and the high rate of school drop-out among teens.

“We’re so thrilled to have the support, especially from Solano Community Foundation,” Weingard said. “The grant will continue to help serve the kids and maintain the program. We’re very appreciative.”

The Nonprofit Partnership Program was created to promote partnerships among community members and designed to broaden the vision for community well-being. As part of their mission to help local nonprofits offer their important services to Solano County residents, competitive grants are offered to one designated city each year in Solano. For 2010, the program will focus on Fairfield and Suisun City.

For more information on NPP, visit www.solanocf.org.