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Education

IN THE CLASSROOM: 'Shalimar Center good for city'

Costa Mesa official visits after-school program to recognize work to assist kids who have fallen through the cracks.

By Saneyee Purandare

The air was thick with emotion and memories at the Shalimar Learning Center in Costa Mesa on Wednesday afternoon. The founders and volunteers sat teary-eyed in the front porch between the two apartments that constitute the classrooms of the center. The special guest of the day was Mayor Pro Tem Wendy Leece, who was there to deliver a city proclamation lauding the center.

"I wanted to recognize the fact that you are changing the lives of kids who have fallen through the cracks," she said as she read the proclamation. "Costa Mesa greatly benefits from an organization that is changing lives and futures of the children in the community."

Silvia Vargas is an example of someone whose life was changed. One of seven siblings, she was brought to America by her mother for an education and a better life. Vargas was one of the first students at Shalimar and has been a member for all of its 12 years.

"The center has provided the kids in our community a place to be in, to stay away from all the temptations around us. It has brought hope to my family," she said.

This year, out of the 14 college-admittance letters that hang in the inside room of the center, one belongs to Vargas. She will be among the many first-generation high school graduates in the community, who have gone on to a four-year college.

Every day, about a hundred students come to the Shalimar Learning Center after school. As they start to arrive in batches for the elementary, intermediate and high school programs, they are first given snacks. They then work on homework with tutors, participate in reading programs, or work on the center's computers. On Fridays the kids are exposed to various extra-curricular activities like arts and crafts.

"Our volunteers include school and college students from the community, doctors, teachers and anyone who likes to help," coordinator Bobby Munillo said. "We try to have a group of well-rounded positive people around the kids."

For volunteer Dottie Feeney, one of the most rewarding feelings is watching the kids' progress.

“They go to school all day, and then they come here in the evening. We know what their home lives are like. It is very rewarding to see them come back years later and say hello,” Feeney said.

KIDS TALK BACK

What do you want to be when you grow up?

“I want to be a famous soccer player.”

— **Juan Casas**

“I want to be a policewoman. I want to fight crime.”

— **Jacqueline Che**

“I want to be a doctor and help fight cancer.”

— **Mayte Pacheco**

“I want to be a fashion designer. I like drawing dresses in my free time.”

— **Natalie Ceron**

“I want to be a librarian because I love books.”

— **Adjani Orozco**