

Building Blocks

The Kids at Salinas Community School Aim for Peace

BY BRETT WILBUR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLI ULDALL



On an overcast morning at the Salinas Community School, a group of high schoolers dressed in shades of black and gray are working on their running stitch. Colorful sunsets, peace signs, doves, eagles and hearts are among the many designs being embroidered, drawn, and iron-heat transferred onto fabric squares. The completed squares, or blocks, are stacked neatly on teacher Chris Devers' desk, next to his approaching mathematics lesson. In a few weeks, the blocks will be joined together to form a "peace quilt." It's a project that has taken many hands to complete.

Laura Tinajero, an intervention specialist at Second Chance, a Salinas nonprofit that does gang intervention and counseling, is helping finish a square that a girl now in juvenile hall didn't get to finish.

"She is pretty proud of the work she accomplished," Tinajero says. "With the quilting program they stay busy and it's a new experience for them. Anytime you try something new, it opens doors."

Devers, who speaks fluent Spanish, makes sure the class is staying focused while local volunteer Terry Uchida helps kids who have finished their block move on to other projects. Some boys are using a loom to knit black beanies, other kids are learning paper crafting, and one ambitious girl is sewing a purse.

Those who know what most of the students have already

dealt with in their short lives realize just how meaningful a peace quilt is. Salinas Community School is an alternative school with 60 students, run through the Monterey County Office of Education, and most of the kids at the school have been expelled from their previous schools. It is the last stop before being turned over to the juvenile justice system, which is located next door. In five years of Devers teaching here, he says, 11 students have either been murdered or committed murder. It is a reality that is dealt with in the classroom while the focus remains on creating a better life.

"Everything that happens in Salinas flows through my kids," Devers says. "The peace quilt gets kids to focus on habits of mind, settle down, show up on time, learn about starting and finishing a project, concentrating, and [pay-

ing attention to] detail. There is [the gain of] self-satisfaction, self-esteem, problem solving—so much that goes into it. It is group work and integration of people into a common project."

With hard work and creative programs that get the kids into nature, give them vocational training, and learn conflict resolution through a class developed with local nonprofit Global Majority (see sidebar), Devers says the school has seen huge successes in passing and attendance rates. This despite a very limited budget.

"We have the most contact [of anyone] with these kids," Devers says. "We are where they feel safe. We are doing the most with the very least."

For the students, one of the main frustrations seems to be a perceived lack of respect from the community at large for the



Last year, kids at Salinas Community School attended a peace summit. They also take conflict resolution classes and have completed a peace quilt.

Talking Instead of Violence

Global Majority Teaches
How to Resolve Conflict Peacefully



Photo: Kelli Uchida

Executive Director Cameron Hunter and Program Director Lejla Mavis of the nonprofit Global Majority, based in Monterey, teach conflict resolution.

Lejla Mavis, program director and founding member of the Monterey-based Global Majority nonprofit, grew up in war-torn Bosnia. A 14-year-old refugee to the U.S., Mavis vowed to work for peace and graduated from the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) with a major in international policy studies and a certificate in conflict resolution.

In 2003, Mavis and a group of students worked with current Assemblyman Bill Monning to form Global Majority, with the goal of promoting nonviolent conflict resolution education, mediation, and advocacy.

Mavis works on projects such as helping Israelis and Palestinians negotiate conflict in the Middle East, brings students from MIIS to help the native population of Chile, and helps local students avoid fights, whether it be boyfriend versus girlfriend or on the gang level. Some local schools, including the Salinas Community School, (see main feature) offer a conflict resolution class struc-

tured by Global Majority. Students role-play a potential argument and are asked to find a positive resolution, taking all viewpoints into consideration.

"We help them understand conflict is not a bad thing," Mavis says. "They think of violence, fighting, and arguments, all of these negative things. Conflict is very neutral. It's the way we approach it and how we end up dealing with it whether it becomes negative or positive. It can be an opportunity for growth or relationship building."

Recently, one very special guest speaker was Maya Soetoro Ng, President Barack Obama's half-sister, to the amazement of the high school students.

"It was incredible," Mavis says. "She was talking about her own brother, and saying, 'Look at him as an example. No one can tell you that you can't do something.'"

For more information, or to donate, go to <http://globalmajority.org>, or call 831/372-5518.

—Brett Wilbur

efforts they are making at school.

One girl who drew palm trees and an ocean against a vibrant sunset for her block says, "It shows peace against gang violence. It shows people who have a bad reputation can do good things. It's fun, kind of hard."

Last year, a peace summit at the school was capped off with a peace treaty. Devers' friend, Terry Uchida, a local craftsperson who works at Beverly's Fabrics, came to sign the treaty and suggested to Devers that the kids create a peace quilt. Devers asked Uchida to spearhead the project.

Now Uchida brings brownies and cookies along with donated fabric and supplies. She teaches sewing and works with some students who say that "nothing" makes them feel peaceful.

One girl with a sweet smile and a hoodie drawn tightly around her head is listening with headphones to music on one of the school's Mac notebooks while she does her work. Her design is an eagle copied from a book that she colored and Uchida scanned to transfer onto her square.

"The quilt is different [from other projects]," the girl says. "It kept my mind off things. It relaxed me." When asked if all the kids took it seriously, she answers, "It depends on if the kid has patience. A lot of kids took it more seriously. There are a lot of kids [volunteering to] help after they are done. Everybody has problems, but we need to focus on getting better. I think one day we will have peace."

She maintains that the school is not filled with a bunch of "bad" kids.

"Our school is just a school with regular kids who have problems and are working on them. We're not gangs. We're trying to do better."

A quiet boy says he enjoys making the designs for the quilt squares for fun, but there will be no impact on ending violence. "It's not going to change a thing," he says, so softly it is hard to hear him. "People leave gangs and then come back."

A tall senior boy has embroidered the State of California with Monterey County outlined in



A 14-year-old boy who was working on the peace quilt was killed recently in a gang-related shooting in Salinas. Classmates took over the work on his block, and also created a block in his honor that reads: "RIP My Homie."



"reggae colors" with a peace sign. He cheerfully says the experience has been really good.

"It gives us sewing skills and it makes us more mellow," he says. "I want to go to college and have a good job working with animals. Mr. Devers is really cool...I feel more confident about myself."

What started as a small volunteer project for Terry Uchida grew into much more on a personal level.

"I can't stop thinking about these kids when I'm not with them," Uchida says, "and I have kids of my own and other responsibilities. I wonder every time there's a shooting, I wonder was it one of my kids. It has totally changed my outlook on things."

Shortly after beginning her work with the

kids, a tragedy occurred. A 14-year-old boy from class was shot and killed.

"He ate my brownies that morning," Uchida says, still shocked. "He was gone by that afternoon."

'We have two gangs and all the tension from the streets comes under one roof at one time here, and only here.'

— Chris Devers

Other kids in the class offered to work on the boy's quilt square. And another girl created a square that says, "RIP My Homie."

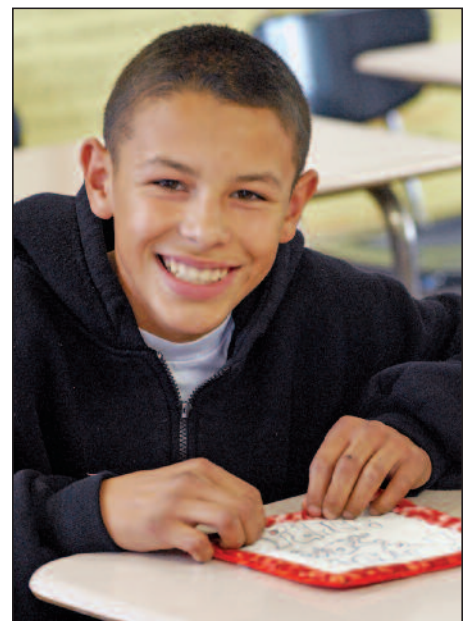
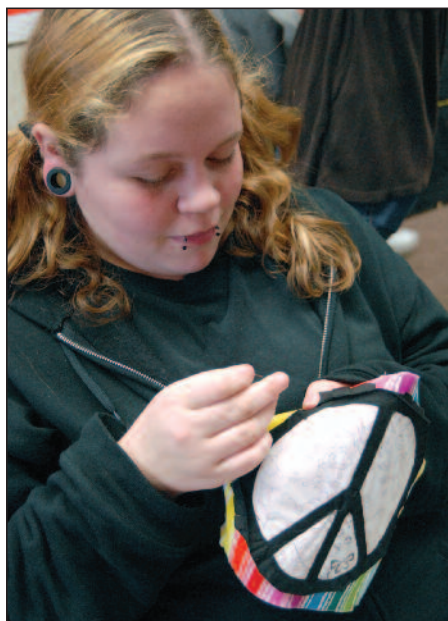
"He's not a number, he was [the kid I knew]," Uchida says sadly. "He was somebody's kid, friend, brother. It made it so much more personal."

Uchida says the kids have affected her more than she has helped them.

"They have opened up part of their lives to me," Uchida says gratefully. "It is so amazing to see these great big tatted, pierced boys finishing three blocks and working on a block for someone who died. These kids are so talented and can be really polite. If I helped one make a connection with one thing in his life, then it's been worth it."

When the quilt is completed, Uchida hopes to sell it to raise money for the class or to find a place to display it.

"I don't know if it will bring peace," she admits, "I don't think it is going to change the



The Sky's the Limit

Kids at Rancho Cielo Get a Second Chance



Photo: Kelli Ujdall

Retired Monterey County Superior Court Judge John Phillips founded Rancho Cielo, which provides education, vocational training and recreational opportunities for at-risk youth.

Situated on 100 acres in Salinas near the Gabilan foothills lies Rancho Cielo Youth Campus. With its mission of turning lives around, this remarkable nonprofit organization provides at-risk youth with education, vocational training, recreation and additional services needed to help them become accountable, competent and responsible citizens of the community.

Meaning “ranch of the sky/heavens,” Rancho Cielo was founded in 2000 by retired Monterey County Superior Court Judge John Phillips. Having spent much of his career in the criminal arena sending young people to prison, he recognized the need for preventative programs.

“We try to expose these kids to all the things they should have been exposed to, growing up in the proper environment,” he explains.

Through partnerships with public agencies, such as Monterey County’s Probation Department and Office of Education, private organizations and community members, Rancho Cielo implements a comprehensive set of programs for its 100 students, from core academic curriculum and job prepara-

tion to substance abuse treatment and gang prevention. (Rancho Cielo is under MCOE, the same umbrella agency as Salinas Community School, see main feature.)

“When you take these young people that haven’t been exposed to positive influences, and you give them the opportunity, you can see changes sooner than I ever thought,” Phillips says. So far, the efforts have made a tremendous impact—the recidivism rate for students has decreased by 77% compared to students not attending Rancho Cielo.

Since site renovations began in 2003, the campus boasts a barbecue area, classrooms, the Zoller Gymnasium, two fishing ponds, a community garden and hiking trails. Its newest addition, the Drummond Culinary Academy, opened its doors this January, and celebrated with a benefit event held at the Monterey Plaza Hotel. Expansion will continue with the Vocational Center, soon to offer training in carpentry, welding, automotive repair, and farm operations.

For more information, or to donate, call 831/444-3533 or go to www.ranchocieloyc.org.

—Katie Perry

killings on the East Side. But you’ve got all those boys making tiny little stitches and that’s saying something. Just the fact I have a room full of teenagers [from different sides] sitting and working together; I think that’s peace in whatever form it is.”

The transformations at Salinas Community School have taken place with the help of many other programs, including an outdoor recreation class Devers leads.

“We get kids out of Salinas, outside breathing fresh air, and looking at real things,” he says. “Many have never been to the ocean. We try to take them places they can go back to with their families. They learn to observe, be more in tune with the ecosystem, pay attention to detail. While they are walking together they settle down... We have [people who work with them on] GPS skills, digital photography, sketching and journal writing.”

Devers points out that the kids have had to deal with things that most people couldn’t imagine, and as a result, have “shut down.” Nature, he says, can be the greatest healer.

For Devers, finding creative projects like the peace quilt is a way to spark a kid’s interest and show that there is more to life than what they’ve seen so far.

“It used to be a pretty hard-core place and we are turning it into a more loving environment,” Devers says. “A third of the kids are alternative, smart and artsy and don’t fit into [regular] school. They need more attention. A third of the kids are Norteño and a third Sureño.”

Probation officers on campus and strict rules and security enforce that school is a safe place, while Devers tries to keep the emphasis on positive changes. The school, he says, is the only place where kids from rival gangs can



The peace quilt “is a visible sign that we’d like change,” volunteer Terry Uchida (left) says. Instructional assistant Eleanor Gamboa (center) helps out in teacher Chris Devers’ (right) class with projects like the peace quilt. “It gives them something to do with their hands, to relieve stress,” Uchida says. “...You have a connection with a kid for a moment.”

co-exist in a safe way.

“We have two gangs and all the tension from the streets comes under one roof at one time here, and only here,” Devers says. “School is a place to be neutral and focus on gaining skills and getting a high school diploma. We hope this will result in a different path down on the road.”

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peace quilt is a way to spark a kid’s interest and show that there is more to life than what they’ve seen so far.

“The peace quilt is a hugely powerful project and part of a much larger picture of how we are teaching kids,” Devers says. “[We want to] focus on school, personal healing, confidence and self-esteem. We’ve worked hard to

make this a nice place.”

For more information on the Peace Quilt project, or starting a project like it, contact Terry Uchida at thatquiltlady@gmail.com. For more information about the Salinas Community School, contact Chris Devers at cdevers@monterey.k12.ca.us. Donations of craft supplies or to the school materials fund are gratefully accepted. ■



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