



**YOUTH
SPEAK!
COLLECTIVE**

**BUILDING A FUTURE
FOR YOUTH BY YOUTH**

Agency keeps teens out of trouble

Involvement in mural, garden, sports projects helps kids and community, too

By Connie Llanos, Staff Writer

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Painting murals, planting gardens and organizing soccer leagues are not part of typical intervention programs for at-risk teens.

But for thousands of middle and high schools students in the Northeast San Fernando Valley, it is these community-driven activities, organized by local non-profit Youth Speak Collective, that helps them stay out of trouble.

"I get to meet new people and stay off the streets," said Laura Ruvira, a 16-year-old sophomore from San Fernando High School.

"These activities make me feel like even though I'm a teenager I have a reason to speak up, not just for myself, but for others who think their voice doesn't count."

Launched in 2005, the mission of the Youth Speak Collective is to give teens in this region a role in their often under-served communities.

From the outset, the organization has had teens at the steering wheel, making them organize change - not just participate in it.

It was teen members of Youth Speak who wrote the initial grant for the non-profit - a \$10,000 grant that allowed them to create the small park in Pacoima, that they also designed.

"We have always been 'for youth, by youths'" said David Kietzman, executive director and co-founder of Youth Speak.

The successful completion of that project earned Youth Speak the recognition of community leaders and local politicians.

"They provide youth leadership with a hands-on approach so it actually means something

to these kids," said Councilman Richard Alarcon, who represents a large portion of the Northeast Valley.

Since that initial project, Youth Speak has taken on several other community efforts, including converting a 4-acre plot of city owned land in Pacoima into a flourishing community garden, run and operated completely by local teens and community members.

Also with their soccer program, "Futbolito", Youth Speak has brought year-round athletics to a region that didn't have access to sports programs.

On a daily basis more than 400 teens from the Northeast Valley are served by some community program organized by Youth Speak the organization estimates.

"They are involved in doing projects that will last in



the community for a long time," Alarcon added.

"With so much cynicism in this world today... these programs shows kids that being cynical doesn't produce anything - action does."

San Fernando High School social studies teacher Malcolm Foley, said that beyond giving students something to do, the work they get involved with at Youth Speak also translates to better grades in class.

"Being engaged in their communities gives them confidence in their own ideas," Foley said.

"It also teaches them to be problem solvers and once that passion is awakened it correlates to the classroom because they see their work in a larger framework and it drives them to work harder."

Kietzman, who is only 30 himself, said the visual nature of Youth Speak projects also helps students feel like they are a part of their communities - something that helps them stay away from gangs and drugs.

"When they see their work - whether it's a mural, garden, or tree-scaping they see that their ideas can be put into action and it makes them feel empowered," Kietzman said.

"It's a sustainable model... We are creating the youth leaders of this century."