



Valley Youth Spruce up Park & Exhibit Paintings with CRA/LA Help to Nonprofit

Before David Kietzman co-founded Youth Speak! Collective (www.youthspeakcollective.org), he noticed that social agencies with youth programs often neglected to ask the kids themselves what they wanted. So, he took an opposite tack and spoke directly to teens in the Northeast San Fernando Valley.

"The thing that stood out was they said, 'We want our community to look good. We want to be proud of where we live,'" Kietzman explained.

Now, five years later, two of the most successful and high profile Youth Speak! Collective programs are Project Youth Green, a four-acre community garden in Pacoima, and a murals design class whose teen artists exhibited in the North Hollywood offices of the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles (CRA/LA).

With CRA/LA participation, more than 100 community volunteers and young people helped weed, mulch, plant trees and bushes, install an irrigation system and touch up a mural this summer at Project Youth Green. Located behind Roger Jessup Park in Pacoima, the project includes a community garden, a fruit tree orchard, walking paths, tables and benches and open space.

Also this summer, CRA/LA helped fund an art class that featured lectures on the 1970s Chicano protest movement. Eighteen class members incorporated Chicano symbols and messages in their pieces which were displayed in CRA/LA offices in the NoHo Art District. More than 80 community members attended the Oct. 3 opening where three works were sold.

"The CRA/LA and YSC share the same goals – to make our neighborhoods a better place to live – but we simply use different tools," said CRA/LA Project Manager Duran Villegas. "We decided to collaborate using the 'Unheard Voices' art exhibit as our mutual tool and we are proud of the synergy we've created."

Kietzman, the group's executive director, and Whitney Kasserman, now director of program development, began the nonprofit with modest, community volunteer days and youth events. They focused on teens 11 to 19 years of age estranged from community and family. Youth Speak! Collective now has five full-time and 20 part-time staff and a \$500,000 yearly budget with funding from state and City sources, foundations, corporations and individuals.

Programs include:

- § Educational support – SAT preparation, academic tutoring, online college courses and work skills development.
- § Creative expression – writing and production of a youth-oriented newspaper, web and graphic design, digital photography, film making and mural design.
- § Community Revitalization – adult ESL and technology classes, collaborative events and volunteer days, family & community development groups.
- § Youth empowerment – youth leadership, development and advocacy classes.

A weekly, drop-in Youth Council enables teens who attend to essentially move the nonprofit forward by planning, directing and producing the community projects they devise.

"Since our programs are designed by the youth, they help recruit their peers to join, so we've never had a problem with low attendance," Kietzman said. "They design their own flyers for class and post items on their own MySpace™ pages."

"It makes our programs more sustainable and we're starting to see the positive impact in our community," he said.