

Kids bring serenity to Pacoima

Japanese garden project reconnects to area's past



BY RICK COCA
Valley News Writer

When the kids at Youth Speak Collective decided to dedicate themselves to building *Proyecto Kawazoe*, a Japanese Garden at Richie Valens Park in Pacoima, they had no idea they were resurrecting a bit of history.

Initially, a garden with plants and trees, smooth black benches and winding trails dedicated to peace and serenity was reason enough for the teens to pursue the the project.



Rick Coca/Valley News

Arleen Rodriguez added an artist's touch to the garden's planters.

But during the process of writing a grant proposal, receiving funding and constructing the garden, the young members of Youth Speak, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping low-income children develop skills to pursue higher education, learned that their predominantly Latino Northeast Valley neighborhood was once home to thousands of Japanese Americans. The Japanese came to the area to farm and open up nurseries following their interment during WWII.

"We learned about the history and it started to make more sense to us," said Gabriela Sibrian, an 18-year-old graduating senior from Discovery Charter High School in Pacoima. She is headed to Antioch College in Ohio.

Sibrian helped write the initial proposal to the city of Los Angeles Community Beautification Grant, which resulted in a \$10,000 matching grant for the project, with political, community and business leaders contributing in matching funds and services.

At the garden's dedication recently, Sibrian and about 20 other teenage volunteers ate Japanese food, received proclamations and proudly showed off the garden's 15 trees and more than 300 plants spread over 3,000 square feet.

Proyecto is Spanish for project and *Kawazoe* is Japanese for "park next to running water," because the garden is next to the Pacoima Wash.

The garden includes a mix of traditional Japanese and drought-resistant plants and trees, including Gold-Medallion, Heavenly Bamboo, Artemisia and Canary Island Pine. When full grown, the trees will provide much-needed shade in the park. The students created the garden from a patch of dirt located at the back-end of the park. They designed a tile mosaic cover for a trash bin located at the edge of the garden. The mosaic includes the Japanese flag, the Youth Speak name, a red-clenched fist and the names of the project's many sponsors and supporters.

Along with Whitney Kasserman, David Kietzman is co-director for Youth Speak Collective. He said the garden's success is due to the fact the teens came up with the idea themselves.

"When there's programs that they want to do, there's a lot more buying in," Kietzman said.

Arleen Rodriguez, 17, and a senior at San Fernando High School, is not an official member of Youth Speak, but offered her drawing and painting talents to help the garden's design. She painted pandas and Japanese-style houses on the garden's planters.

Rodriguez said she enjoyed the calm she felt the first time she visited the garden. As a resident of the sometimes rough-and-tumble Pacoima neighborhood, Rodriguez said she hopes those who might do damage to the garden, think twice, so that children can enjoy it years from now.

"I know some of the people who live here," Rodriguez said. "I'm going to tell them to leave it alone."

Cristy Barrera, 15, of San Fernando High School, and a Youth Speak garden volunteer, addressed an audience of well-wishers.



Rick Coca/Valley News

Youth Speak Collective members at home in *Proyecto Kawazoe*, the Japanese garden that they built.

"We learned how much effort it takes from a small dedicated group of people to change this community," Barrera said.

Youth Speak Collective participants who volunteered for the *Proyecto Kawazoe* included Jackie Arriaga, Cristy Barrera, Edward Castañeda,

Francisco Castañeda, Armando Contreras, Nancy Flores, Evelyn Gomez, Javier Guerrero, Santiago Lopez, Jessica Lua, Lucy Mandujano, Gina Meza, Graciela Montero, Juan Pedro Muñoz, Oscar Ochoa, Danny Ortiz, Marcos Reyes, Jael Rivera, Dario Saucedo, Gabriela Sibrian,

Victor Valadez, Homero Valdivinos and Carlos Valles.

Youth Speak Collective meets 6 p.m. Tuesdays at the Pacoima Community Center, 11243 Glenoaks Blvd., Suite 3. For more information, call (818) 834-5179, or go to www.youthspeakcollective.org.

