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Pregnancy Prevention in an Unexpected Area

Skid Row Program Helps Teens Stay Out of Trouble

by Ryan Vaillancourt

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - In a painting with a series of mini self-portraits, Ariana Murrieta, 16, depicts herself in three ways: as a college graduate in cap and gown, a doctor in blue scrubs with a stethoscope around her neck and as a suit-clad professional.

"Like a business woman or a lawyer," said Murrieta, a shy, soft-spoken junior at Downtown's Oscar De La Hoya charter high school.



High school students in Para Los Ninos' after school program talk about the economic, social and quality of life dangers of teen pregnancy. Photo by Gary Leonard.

The images represent the dreams of many teenagers, but a closer look at Murrieta's painting suggests she isn't your average teen. Her three self-portraits are drawn against a tan background that is actually her belly, bulging with an imagined pregnancy. In thin, cursive script, a title at the top reads "A Dream Deferred."

That's one of the messages that the directors of the Para Los Ninos Youth Center in Skid Row, where Murrieta is one of about 60 students participating in an after-school sex education program, are hoping to impart.

The center has been serving children and teens from at-risk areas in and around Downtown Los Angeles for 28 years, focusing on academics, the arts, college preparation and leadership. Now, for the first time, the program is weaving comprehensive sex education and teen pregnancy prevention into its curriculum.

It is an unexpected option on Skid Row, where youth-oriented resources are notoriously scarce. The program is the only one of its kind in the area that organization officials know about.

Para Los Ninos launched the program with a three-year, \$300,000 grant awarded last year by the California Wellness Foundation.

Natalia Flores, who directs the after-school program at the facility at 849 E. Sixth St., said the organization applied for the funding after it realized that teen pregnancy prevention and general sex education was "a hole" in its curriculum.

"We noticed the teens talking about pregnancy and being scared about it," Flores said. "They started bringing it to our attention."

In 2006, Los Angeles County recorded 41.5 pregnancies for every 1,000 teen girls, slightly higher than the state average of 39.9. But in the 22nd Senate District, which includes the low-income neighborhoods that most Para Los Ninos participants call home, the figure jumps to 59.1, according to the nonprofit Public Health Institute. The institute estimates that that translates to a \$61 million annual cost to taxpayers.

Para Los Ninos Executive Director Gisselle Acevedo attributes the birth rate in these communities largely to a disproportionate lack of access to sex education resources and information compared to wealthier neighborhoods.

"Teen pregnancy costs taxpayers money, and unfortunately they're going to look at our kids, at the minority kids, as the ones having high rates of pregnancy," Acevedo said. "But I believe that education is the great equalizer."

Helping Tentative Parents

The Para Los Ninos Youth Center runs into some of the same problems faced by any educator when it comes to teaching sex education and teen pregnancy prevention.

The subject is somewhat taboo. During a recent 45-minute session in the Downtown center, some topics prompted bursts of teenage laughter. But there were also silent moments of reflection and honest storytelling about friends and family dealing with the social and economic perils of teen pregnancy.

"At first, if I see my friend is pregnant, I'd be like, what are you going to do?" said Jennifer Rodriguez, 16. "Are you going to have someone to take care of it? Are you going to keep studying?"

Another student suggested abortion as an option, but the boy next to him shook his head and shouted, "That's terrible, man."

The group's openness about sex and pregnancy likely presented a stark contrast to the home environment, where Flores believes a gregarious student could fall silent when the subject comes up. But it's usually not the student's fault; it's the parents, she said.

"When we introduced the topic to the parents we were a little bit nervous, but wow, the parents welcomed it," Flores said. "They were like, 'Yes, talk to our kids about it because we don't know how.'"

Parents are not completely off the hook. As part of the program, which is broken up into three 10-week sessions, parents come to the Downtown facility for workshops that teach them how to talk about sex and pregnancy with their children.

"The parent involvement part is very important," said Flores, adding that their work at the center is diminished if students go home and are not comfortable talking about the issues.

Competitive Funds

The California Wellness Foundation grant is not exclusively tied to teen pregnancy prevention; a portion of the funds also support in-house college preparation and health advisors at Para Los Ninos.

Julio Marcial, program director at the foundation, sees the two services as inherently linked.

"Whether it's teen pregnancy or gang violence, there's always a focus on prevention, but in turn what are you promoting?" Marcial said. "For us, it's stay in school, get an education, speak to your parents about what you're dealing with, and that's what they're doing here."

The California Wellness Foundation, which counts teen pregnancy prevention as its second priority after curbing gang violence, gave \$4.8 million to teen sex education programs in the state last year. About 20 organizations received funds out of the nearly 100 that applied, he said.

"Our funding is very competitive, because we're one of the only organizations that provides these kinds of dollars," he said.

Count student Iris Lamas, 16, among those grateful that Para Los Ninos was one of the recipients.

"The sex ed is good because we don't learn this in our house, because our parents feel uncomfortable and at school we don't get this either," Lamas said. "Parents, they don't want to know their kids' sex life. Kids being pregnant are their worst fears, I think."

Contact Ryan Vaillancourt at ryan@downtownnews.com.