

Second Chances

A Bay Area-based Christian group is reaching out to at-risk Sacramento youths

Today's Youth Matter offers hope to kids in foster and group care

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--The Today's Youth Matter organization has left an indelible mark on Cristina's troubled 16-year-old life.

Now, as she approaches aging out of the nonprofit program for at-risk youths, she has decided giving back is the best way of staying involved.

"I guess I'm getting too old to go to camp. I wanted to help out because I don't want to stop being a part of **TYM**," the Oakley teen said. "It's something to take my mind off everything else and have fun."

On Saturday, Cristina attended her first Today's Youth Matter winter camp as a volunteer, doling out the same hugs and kind words to hurting children that she had received.

She hopes her experiences will help her empathize with younger children struggling their way through abusive situations, foster care or life in a group home.

After all, that's the kind of support she received from the nonprofit's leadership.

"They're my role models. I love them," said Cristina, whose last name is being withheld at the request of organizers. "They're like my older sisters. I guess they look out for me."

Today's Youth Matter is a Christian-affiliated nonprofit organization that works with children ages 8 to 18 who have been through "the system" in one way or another. Most now are in foster or group homes.

The organization is based out of the Bay Area, but a fledgling Sacramento chapter is reaching out to local at-risk youths.

"One of our mantras is, 'Give them hope for the future,' " said Tucker Farrar, who started the local chapter in September. "We want to develop relationships with them and show them there are adults ... who will love them for who they are regardless of their past."

The Bay Area chapter of Today's Youth Matter operates on a \$350,000 annual budget, with money coming in through fund-raisers, donations and grants. Farrar estimates the Sacramento chapter will run on a \$60,000 budget.

The money goes toward summer and winter camps for children in the program as well as informal get-togethers and weekly lunches organized by leaders to fulfill their roles as mentors and tutors.

Some set up incentive programs to encourage better behavior or improved grades.

Cristina was able to attend a horseback-riding camp in Oregon as a reward for better academic performance, and the experience resounded with her.

"They watch over us and do what's best for us," she said. "They teach me a lot of things toward life - to make the right decisions and be respectful toward everyone."

On this particular Saturday, about 15 girls ages 8 to 12 enjoyed a daylong winter camp at Kingvale Tubing & Sledding Center off Interstate 80.

The girls started the day with a short prayer for a safe drive and continued with songs, stories, laughs, tubing and plenty of snowball fights.

Many of the girls were veterans of Today's Youth Matter and sang the organization's praises.

Melinda, 12, of Oakley said she values the friendships she has developed with other girls in the program.

"You make a lot of friends, and it's always a bunch of fun," she said. "You always see people you know, no matter where they live."

Melinda also said she appreciates the caring leadership provided by staff members and volunteers.

"They teach us all about God and Jesus and how they want to help us go to heaven," she said. "They go out of their way to do stuff for us, and that's really cool."

Nine-year-old Tamisha of Richmond is especially protective of the group's leaders.

"I look up to them," she said. "I don't want anyone bothering them."

The experience with Today's Youth Matter has so touched 10-year-old D'mekka, also of Richmond, that she is lobbying for her best friend to join the program.

"It's kind of like the family I never had. It's good to get away from school and everything," she said. "I want (my friend) to see what it's like to come to camp, somewhere where they can take care of you, and you can have fun."

Only one Sacramento girl attended the camp, as Farrar is struggling to develop resources in the area. So far, he has worked with 21 children but hopes to serve more.

For more information about Today's Youth Matter, visit www.tymkids.org or contact Farrar at (916) 541-5984 or sactym@yahoo.com.

Aside from the usual fund-raising obstacles facing a nonprofit, Farrar said building the program is challenging because some people are wary of the organization's Christian leaning.

But leaders stress that their religion serves only as inspiration and an avenue for outreach, not as a mandate.

"We're definitely not shoving Jesus down their throats," said Kristal Buckner, a program director for the Bay Area chapter.

"Mostly we just want to show them God through our actions," she said.

Farrar said the intention of Today's Youth Matter is to serve children with special needs.

Religion is sometimes able to provide comfort and even some answers, he said, but love is the real doctrine.

"Our goal isn't to convert them all," he said. "Our goal is to help them heal and give them hope for the future and give them love in their lives.

"If they start asking questions about God to find healing, then that's even better."