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he dropout-gang connection: Lessons learned in Sacramento St. Odilia teens meet with state officials to voice concerns on budget cuts that impact youth.

By R. W. Dellinger

Two South Los Angeles youth who belong to the grassroots group LA Voice, journeyed to Sacramento last month along with 128 other youths and 120 adults from 17 California affiliate organizations of the national community organizing network PICO.

Fernando Torres, 15, and Ana Karen Calvillo, 16, met with Secretary of Education David Long, Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell and State Senator Darrell Steinberg, urging the state officials to fund a student data system this year to track dropouts, despite California's \$16 billion budget deficit.

They also asked questions and expressed concerns about the proposed budget cuts to education, teacher quality, support for small and alternative high schools plus parent involvement in their children's education.

The PICO youth and adult leaders also met with Paul Seave, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's recently named director of Gang and Youth Violence Policy. He talked about the crucial connection between California's dropout crisis and the rise in youth gang-related violence.

In addition, they spent time getting to know what other youths were doing to solve problems in their neighborhoods.

All in all, the Feb. 24-25 trip was a heady experience for the two Jefferson High School students from South L.A.

"It was great because I've never been to Sacramento," Fernando said. "And not a lot of people get the chance that we got to meet with the people that we met. I've never been to anyplace where there were people explaining about their problems in their community."

Ana nodded. "Steinberg was the most inspiring in my opinion because he spoke like a real person, not just giving out fake promises," she said. "I remember when he stated the budget cut for education of \$5 billion was not going to happen. And he said it with meaning, like he really wasn't going to let that happen."

Staying in school

The teenagers were sitting around a table in the hall at St. Odila Church at 53rd Street and Hooper Avenue with Yanira Rivas, the LA Voice organizer who accompanied them to the state capitol. Both students agreed with a December 2007 report linking high school dropout rates to gang violence. "Fight Crime: Invest in Kids California showed that high school dropouts are 3 1/2 times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested and more than eight times as likely to wind up in jail or prison.

"Dropout rates increase mainly because of gang-related things like girls getting pregnant or boys joining gangs," Ana pointed out. "We believe they're connected because usually people get involved into gangs, and then they end up in crime and drugs and violence. Someone who doesn't get involved in gangs is obviously going to have a better future. They're going to keep focused and continue with school."

"If someone makes the gang their focus instead of school, they just get off the path and end up in destruction," she stressed, "if not in juvenile hall or jail or, who knows, even death."

Now Fernando was nodding. "The two things go together," he said. "Kids look at gangs and it's like, 'That looks cool and interesting. I'm going to get in 'cause I want to fit in.' And then once they do, they drop out."

Ana lives five blocks from St. Odila Church, Fernando about 20 blocks away. Both report gangs are a daily fact of life in their neighborhoods as well as at Jefferson High. Along with tagging and party crews - which are start-up groups that often morph into more serious crimes - they know of at least 20 gangs in their part of South Los Angeles.

"Gangs are affecting everyone, 'cause you can't go anywhere without some gang coming up and robbing you or something," he pointed out. "Lots of people are like panicked because they can't even go to the store to buy food for their family because they're afraid that the gangs are going to start shooting or killing."

Ana said normally she wouldn't be out this late in the evening, although it was not even seven o'clock. "My parents are very concerned about this area specifically, because they know what's out there," she explained. "They know how many people are out there shooting, killing, selling drugs, raping people."

About peer pressure to join a gang, she said it's lesser for girls. "Well, there are definitely more boy gangs than girl gangs," the junior reported with a puzzled look. "I don't know why, but that's the way it is. And girls don't really force other girls to get into gangs. So I don't have the pressure that Fernando has."

"It's your choice"

"You try to stay out of it," she continued. "You try not to run into those types of people or those types of situations. But when it comes down to getting involved, you have to decide your future - what you want for yourself. It's your choice."

Fernando agreed, explaining how he had to walk a fine line in his choice of friends in and out of school. Sometimes gang-bangers try to get him involved; however, to date, they've respected his wishes to focus on his studies at school.

Still, the freshman said he knows he could be "jumped" (forced) into a gang any day. He has seen it happen to others, but tries not to worry about it.

Both were taken aback by the reaction of their PICO fellow youth members in Sacramento to L.A.'s infamous gang problem.

"They asked us if they killed people here, and we were like, 'Yeah, they do,'" recalled Ana, making a face and shaking her head. "And we just said it like calmly, you know, because it's nothing strange to us." After awhile, the junior said, "I guess you could say we're getting used to it because we've lived here. We've seen a lot."

Sitting up straighter, Fernando reported, "Here they're shooting like every other day or something. And in other places, it's like once a month. I was like amazed."

Yet, the students believed there are some positive measures Los Angeles junior highs and high schools can take to lessen the horrendous dropout rate, which is more than 50 percent in many local inner-city secondary schools, and gang involvement. Both agreed that teachers should pay more attention to kids struggling to stay up with their classmates, instead of concentrating most of their attention on good students.

"Students who are having a hard time learning get left behind," Ana pointed out, "when, in reality, we think it should be the opposite. Teachers should give them more quality time. If you're sitting in a classroom and you can tell that you're the dumb one, then, obviously, you're going to get discouraged and feel like 'school is not for me.'"

"Everyone should finish school and keep on going," Fernando observed, "so they can have a future and continue with their life."

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