



Young and Proud

Inland Empire teens working to get out the vote

Article Launched: 06/23/2008 06:20:40 PM PDT
There's hope.

It's coming in on a beacon of light borne by local youths.

"These kids are more than the hope of the future - they are leaders among young people right now," said Tom Dolan, Inland Congregations United for Change coordinator and a professor at Pitzer College.

"They are leaders in our community now."

As part of the faith-based ICUC, the 100-member youth group represents six area congregations and eight local high schools.

ICUC youth leaders have been shining a light on issues such as racial conflict, youth violence and jobs for students.

They are now grappling with new challenges - projects to "Get Out the Vote" and petitions against proposed budget cuts to education.

They'll do whatever it takes - contact 700 households; meet with local legislators and

educators; maybe meet with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Cajon High School junior Michael Segura said, "We're going to mobilize."

Before California's February primary and the June 3 election, the young people canvassed neighborhoods, knocking on doors, urging people to register and vote - they did phone banking and follow-up.

Now, they're getting really serious.

"Our goal is to register student voters at high schools and let all students know how important voting is," said Kathy Alfaro, who heads the nonpartisan "Get Out the Vote" project for ICUC youth.

"We want to get people pumped up. They need to know it's a privilege and part of living in a democracy," said Alfaro, 20, who is enrolling at San Bernardino Valley College to pursue her degree in nursing.

"If some of our members aren't old enough to vote themselves - it doesn't matter. They can still get others to vote. It's kind of an adult thing to go to people's doors and get them slammed in your face and get yelled at."

Young leaders met last week at Our Lady of the Rosary Cathedral in San Bernardino to brainstorm ideas for their civic projects.

They formed committees and came up with a

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game plan.

In addition to the "Get Out the Vote" project, another committee has circulated a petition requesting the governor not to cut the education budget.

As part of that project, the teens have already accumulated 5,500 signatures.

"We're trying to schedule a meeting with representatives from the governor's office and some of our local legislators. We're hoping we can make some changes in time for the fall semester," said Christian Garcia, a Pacific High School graduate.

"If that happens, we will have accomplished what we set out to do," added Cajon's Michael Segura.

Another youth project is the "World of Difference" program at San Bernardino High School, where they are working with students, teachers and parents to reduce racial conflict.

Maira Espinoza, a sophomore at San Bernardino High, said the committee plans to meet with teachers and Principal Sandra Rodriguez, reminding them of the "World of Difference" and helping them to train people about how to deal with racial conflict.

"Our goal is to get 40 students trained in the 'World of Difference' project, which will begin Aug. 6," the 15-year-old said.

Alfaro said the "Get Out the Vote" project was especially important for this presidential election.

"We've had a woman and a black man running for president. It's pretty important this could happen. Women just got to vote 80 years ago. It's amazing to see how far we've come - it's been more than 200 years but we're making progress."

According to Alfaro, ICUC youth will be meeting with high school principals to find out how they register students and will then ask if they can go to classrooms to talk to students.

"Some students we've talked to have been very positive, but others say, 'why vote? It won't change anything - either way the politicians don't listen.'

"I tell them I don't like politics or politicians but I do this because it's important," Alfaro said.

The Mayor's Project committee wants to meet with San Bernardino Mayor Pat Morris and his staff to discuss programs for kids, said Matthew Aguayo, a freshman at Arroyo Valley High School.

"We're going to do some research for a couple of months and will be looking at what other cities are doing. Then we'll see what works for us," said Rocio Ruiz, a senior at San Geronio High School.

"Also, we want to be able to help make decisions on how the city spends its money in regards to youth programs," Rocio said.

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"They should be thinking about other ways to spend money other than policing because we're not seeing many changes," she said.

"This club makes us feel like we're making a difference," said Jose Quezada. "And we'll keep at it."

Alfaro added, "We're the future. We have good heads on our shoulders. We haven't experienced a lot, but we have to learn what's going on."

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