Walking with the Families of At Risk Youth

Parents of at risk youth ride a tidal wave of emotions: hurt, sadness, guilt, confusion. In a state of defeated silence, they come to Padres Unidos to understand critical parenting skills and how best to communicate and work with their children.

Padres Unidos is a nonprofit organization in partnership with the Orange County diocesan office of Restorative Justice/Detention Ministry that provides classes for parents and families who are struggling to raise their children who are at risk, incarcerated, on probation or affiliated with gangs. Classes for parents are held inside Juvenile Hall and at three Orange County parish sites.

Padres Unidos was started by Patricia Huerta, a single mother of five who went back to school to obtain a Masters degree in Social Work. Patricia’s daughter, who works with her, holds a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology with a concentration in Forensics.

The partnership of Padres Unidos and the Office of Restorative Justice/Detention Ministry began in 2013. Parents were personally invited to participate by Padres Unidos intervention workers and Restorative Justice staff who met them in Juvenile Hall or in their parish community. After successfully completing Padres Unidos classes and putting their newly learned skills into practice improving their home situations, some participants asked for the opportunity to give back. From their request birthed a Professional Development, Paraprofessional Community Worker Award Program developed in partnership with Chapman University’s College of Educational Studies and Padres Unidos.

With the support, knowledge and experience of these now certified community workers, the Hand-In-Hand Family Resource and Support Services was created by the Diocese of Orange’s Office of Restorative Justice to

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provide direct outreach assistance to families in the community.

But what makes the program so successful according to Huerta are the “circles of love.”

“We embrace the families where they are, what they are going through and provide a non-judgmental environment with an open heart, and open arms,” she says.

Many times, describes Huerta, society judges parents of troubled youth and dismisses them as “not able to parent.”

Here, parents know that they are not being judged. “These are good parents who really love their kids,” remarks Huerta “and we are about embracing the most vulnerable. This is what we do every day.”

When asked about the greatest need facing the group, Fred La Puzza, Director of the Office of Restorative Justice/Detention Ministry in the Diocese of Orange describes needs as “constantly in flux.”

Padres Unidos staff look to what is unique to each group, assesses their particular needs, then design a curriculum tailored to address the issues they are facing.

The success rate experienced by Padres Unidos did not go unnoticed by the Probation Department of Orange County. Originally, the department would provide coaching, counseling, and services for parents. Leadership within the county reported that 10 out of the 15 parents who attended remained for its duration.

Padres Unidos boasts a retention rate of 95 percent with the 65-75 parents attending. The Director of Juvenile Hall in Orange County was so impressed that he petitioned the County Board of Supervisors to fund the program with a grant of $750,000 for a 3-5 year contract for the Juvenile Hall site.

Padres Unidos’ success is often attributed to the deep understanding it has of the culture and its dedication to creating community – a vibrant network that is based on enduring relationships. “Parents and families are completely transformed in a very personal and cultural way,” describes La Puzza.

However, beyond the accolades of professionals, the greatest testimony of the success of the program comes from the four-year-old daughter of one of the parent participants.

While greeting parents at the onset of class one evening, Huerta noticed the little girl accompanying her mother was limping and found that the child had blisters on her feet. When asked why, the child explained that she and her mother had walked to class that day, a journey of several miles.

“We do give bus passes,” Huerta reminded her. The mother had been too embarrassed to ask for additional assistance.

“Is the long walk worth it?” Huerta asked the little girl. The child looked up at the two women and beamed. “Oh yes,” she exclaimed. “Now my mommy is happy and does not cry anymore!”

For these and other links to resources, please visit

Diocese of Orange Office of Restorative Justice & Detention Ministry
www.rcbo.org/group/restore/

California Catholic Conference Restoration Justice
RestoreJustice.com

California Catholic Conference
www.cacatholic.org/because-we-are-catholic