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BEATING THE ODDS



Steve McCrank Staff Photographer

Students in the College Bound program of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Los Angeles Harbor trade high-fives at Tuesday's awards ceremony at the Warner Grand Theatre in San Pedro. More than \$80,000 in scholarships was distributed.

Harbor Boys & Girls Clubs' after-school program sets students on college path

By Rob Kuznia Staff Writer

Tabitha Sanchez of San Pedro was born four months premature because her mother was a drug addict.

Fatima Salcido and her mother have lived in the tiny garage of a Carson relative for 12 years, ever since a divorce caused them to lose their home to foreclosure.

Juan Orantes of San Pedro

easily could have followed in the footsteps of some of his family members, whose unfortunate choices led to jail time.

With the help of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Los Angeles Harbor, all three high school seniors are headed to four-year universities. This week, they were among more than 300 at-risk students recognized for not only graduating high

COLLEGE A10



Fatima Salcido and her mother, Guadalupe Raya, have lived in a relative's garage for 12 years, but Fatima is headed to Tulane University to study medicine on a full ride scholarship.

Scott Varley
Staff Photographer



Steve McCrank Staff Photographer

On Tuesday, local donors provided \$80,000 in scholarships to the 318 participants in the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Los Angeles Harbor College Bound program, who are heading for two- and four-year colleges and universities in the fall.

COLLEGE

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school, but doing so with the grades and credits necessary to head to college.

The students are all beneficiaries of the local organization's College Bound program, a kind of after-school complement to the traditional high school academic counselor that is increasingly — during this time of evaporating school budgets — becoming a replacement. At San Pedro High School, for instance, budget cuts have gone so deep that the Boys & Girls Club for the past two years has provided a part-time academic counselor at the school — all on the club's dime.

Harbor Area brainchild

The past two years have witnessed exponential success, so much so that the College Bound program — a local invention — is being replicated by 10 other Boys & Girls Clubs around Los Angeles and dozens more across the state and nation.

But now, it is struggling to avoid becoming a victim of its own success. Exploding demand has left the organization scrambling to find the donations to keep pace. Since its inception a decade ago, operating costs for College Bound have swelled from \$60,000 to \$1.2 million.

"That has become the good burden of our organization," said Mike Lansing, founder of the College Bound program and executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Los Angeles Harbor.

The club charges its members a nominal \$25-a-year fee, but that doesn't begin to cover the costs of about \$1,000 per student.

The bulk of the money comes from donors — that is, from foundations, corporations and generous individuals from the South Bay and Harbor Area. On top of the increased demand, a two-year, \$1 million grant will dry up in December, leaving a gaping hole in the budget.

Like all Girls & Boys Club programs, College Bound happens after school. It provides counselors, tutors and other staff members who work closely with disadvantaged youth every day to map out a four-year plan for finishing high school, as well as to guide them through the daunting rigors of finding a suitable college.

In addition to offering SAT prep courses, academic workshops, college-application assistance, tutoring sessions and low-cost transportation for college visits, the club — in this capacity — also assumes the role of a polite nag.

"If you haven't come by the

club in a long time, they will call you at home or your cell, and talk to your parents as well, just to make sure that you can attend," Salcido said.

The College Bound program is a breakaway from Boys & Girls Club tradition. Historically, the club has been a place for at-risk students to gather after school, through activities such as athletics, dance and music — the fun stuff.

In the late 1990s, the club started building teen centers in San Pedro and Wilmington. By 2001, Lansing began to notice something that gave him pause.

"I was seeing our kids walking to school at 10 or 11 in the morning," he said. "I said, 'This is not good.'"

He asked a staff member how many high school seniors from the club's San Pedro teen center would be graduating on time that spring. The answer: fewer than half.

Lansing launched the College Bound program the following year. Thirty students signed up; only one went on to college. The program was a little slow to take off, but has mushroomed over the past two years. Last year, 234 students went on to two- or four-year colleges. This year, the number rose to 318.

Among them is Tabitha Sanchez, who is proud to say that her mother quit drugs cold turkey the day she was born prematurely 18 years ago.

On Tuesday night, Tabitha and her mother, Lisa Sanchez, were among the hundreds of students and family members who packed into the Warner Grand Theatre in San Pedro, where the students were recognized for their academic achievements. Also that night, students were called to the stage in front of a cheering crowd to accept scholarships from generous local donors; about \$80,000 was distributed in total.

Tabitha took home an \$11,000 award from Taco Bell and an additional \$1,000 from Kiwanis Club of Rolling Hills Estates. She will use the money to pay for tuition and expenses at California State University, Northridge, where she plans to major in communications.

A turbulent life

"From Day One, there has been dysfunction," said Tabitha, a petite young woman whose elegant outfit at the event belied the difficulty of her upbringing. "I was just trying to maintain my grades and follow my heart's desires."

She and her mother have always been chums. But home life has still been turbulent. Tabitha's two older siblings also abused drugs, and frequently clashed with their mother. In 2005, Lisa's fiancé — who was like a father to Tabitha — died of a drug overdose.

And then there was that unforgettable day when Tabitha came into the world. Lisa, addled on speed, had already lost a son in a premature birth, also due to her drug use. She had recently done a stint in jail. In fact, she was a fugitive. The authorities had let her out to bury her son and she had escaped, only to find herself back at the hospital in the same situation more than a year later, while still on the lam. She was feeling guilt-ridden and hopeless.

"I just wanted to die," Lisa said. And indeed she nearly did.

"It was like a black hole," she said. "I was on my way out: dead. I had a spiritual experience. God said, 'Are you sure this is what you want?'"

Lisa says it was at that moment, while still unconscious, that she decided to live, and to be sober.

"My brain clicked over and I thought: 'My kids are never going to know I loved them,'" said. "At that point, I said 'I can't go out like that.'"

Today, things are looking up. Lisa recently purchased her first home, has a good-paying sales job at ITD Print Solutions and is engaged again.

A chance of a lifetime

Fatima Salcido, the student who lives in a garage with her mother, is headed to the private Tulane University in New Orleans, where she plans to study medicine. Like Tabitha, Fatima gets along well with her mother.

This is good, given their cramped quarters, which has space only for two twin beds. To use the restroom or the kitchen, they must walk into her aunt's house.

"I see how, as a single parent, she's been struggling to raise me," Fatima said. "She wasn't able to have the same education as I do now. She only went to seventh grade. I know since I have the opportunity to go to school, I should take it. Everything I'm doing is for her."

Her scholarship to Tulane covers the \$42,000-a-year tuition. She received it only because the Boys & Girls Club nominated her for what is called the Posse Scholarship. After a rigorous series of interviews, she was among the 10 winners of 130 applicants. Fatima learned the good news by cellphone. In April, she was in a classroom at Torrance High when she broke school rules and used her phone to return the call to the Posse Foundation.

"I just couldn't help myself — I was too excited," she said.

Soon, her classmates were surprised to see their mild-mannered classmate jumping up and down. "At first I didn't know what to say. I feel like these kinds of opportunities don't really happen to me."

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