Educational program knocks down barriers students face
By YESENIA AMARO - yamaro@mercedsunstar.com

Vera Reyes had never been to Yosemite National Park.

The UC Merced freshman said it was partly because of financial problems.

"Yosemite was a familiar word, but an unfamiliar place," she said.

Many young people in Merced County don't get the luxury of participating in recreational activities for financial reasons or because of the lack of access to programs that bring such opportunities.

Reyes' comments came during the Building Healthy Youth in Merced County conference Friday at UC Merced.

Reyes eventually got to visit Yosemite through the Adventure Risk Challenge program, which serves Merced County as one of its sites. The program helps English-learning students improve literacy and life skills. "It has changed my life," Reyes said of the program. "I'm no longer one of those people who dream of going there (Yosemite)."

But most importantly, it helped her identify her strengths and weaknesses and gave her academic skills to succeed in college.

Sarah Cupery Ottley, program director, said youth in Merced County and throughout the Central Valley don't have it easy. "There are so many barriers for their success in life," she said during a presentation.

The program serves Merced County because there are fewer opportunities for youngsters compared to larger places, such as the Bay Area, Ottley said. "ARC has helped students graduate from high school, go to college and give back to the community," she said.
California produces one dropout for every three graduates, said Vajra Watson, director of Research and Policy for Equity at the University of California at Davis School of Education's CRESS Center, and founder of the Sacramento Area Youth Speaks.

Watson, who delivered the keynote address, said research has shown that compared to graduates, students who drop out have an increased dependence on public assistance, lower earnings, poorer health, and higher rates of unemployment, mortality, criminal behavior and incarceration. "I have lost more students to prisons and death," she said.

In 2007, 16 young people were murdered every day in the United States, she said.

Jan Wallander, a professor at UC Merced and leader of the Chancellor's Task Force on Community Engaged Scholarship -- the group that organized the conference -- said the purpose of the event was to feature youth development programs that could be useful in the area, and for the community to see how it can further improve youth development locally.

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