THE PATH TO BEING A LEADER

Intense academic study and rugged outdoor activities are hallmarks of the Adventure, Risk and Challenge program.

STORY BY NORA K. WALLACE
PAGE 4

WHAT'S INSIDE:

ZACA FIRE UPDATE
Having consumed 30,700 acres and forced local evacuations, blaze may become largest in California's history.

STORY BY NORA K. WALLACE • PAGE 8

NEWS ROUNDUP ............ 2
AROUND THE VALLEY .... 3
VALLEY VIEWS ............. 6
Bridge to self-reliance

High school students participate in leadership and literacy summer program

By NORA K. WALLACE
News Press Staff Writer

High school seniors Ana Flores and Isla Batista, both of the Santa Ynez Valley Union High School district, explained why they chose to create self-reliance in their lives through the Adventure, Risk and Challenge, or ARC program.

The program, which is a combination of intensive academic studies and community service, has been in operation for four years and is designed to help students develop leadership skills.

Ana, 15, said she feels her spoken English is fine, but that her writing skills were lacking. She said the program has helped her improve. For her, leaving her parents for the first time, for 40 days, was also challenging.

And, she added, “I am doing a lot of things I have never done before and I wasn’t sure I could do, like rock climbing and kayaking.” Some of the students have lived in the U.S. most of their lives; while their spoken English may be perfected, they have lower-level English writing abilities. Other students have been in the U.S. for just a few years. ARC is not always geared toward Spanish speakers — some past years have had Japanese students, said Ms. Gurecki, a credentialed teacher.

According to Ms. Gurecki, 27 percent of “English-language learners” in Santa Barbara County passed the language arts section of the high school exit exam in 2006, compared to 63 percent statewide. ARC’s rate of having its graduates pass the California exit exam is 93 percent, Ms. Gurecki said.

During academic days, the students study and learn things such as vocabulary, grammar and public speaking. There are three major writing assignments during the course, and each teen keeps a journal and writes poetry. Together, they’re reading aloud Norton Juster’s “The Phantom Tollbooth,” and each participant must also read one other book this summer.

In a science component, the students are learning about the watershed of the Earth, and relating it various aspects of the environment. The curriculum is designed around state standards, as well as school district requirements for the 10 units of credit each student will receive.

Cindy Rodriguez, a Santa Ynez High junior, has been in the valley for four years, and is working hard on her English.

“I wanted to learn more English and improve my skills,” she explained. “I want to be independent and learn new things, to take risks.”

The 15-year-old said she feels as if ARC has already helped her, after about 23 days. Her goal is to pass English standards tests.

“I’m improving,” she noted. “I learned new words I never knew.”

On the physical side of the program this summer, the students have already spent a week on Santa Cruz Island and been rock climbing and surfing on the mainland. At the end of the program, the students will venture out on their own four-day backcountry trip, which includes a one-night solo campout. Their bonding started last April with a backpacking trip to the sequoias, said Ms. Gurecki, who is aided by instructors Morgan Williams and Laura Nordaas.

“The goal is to have them pass the high school exit exam,” she noted. “We also want them to excel in school and to create community members. So many of them are not members of a community. By integrating leadership skills and pushing English, they can make connections with the community, and think forward beyond the 40 days.”

Once the summer is over, the students must remain in touch with Ms. Gurecki and complete an additional 40 hours of community service. The students receive a stipend for their involvement. They’ll also receive tutoring for the exit exam and there will be a reunion in the winter.

“We’re building active, engaged community members,” Ms. Gurecki explained. “I’ve never worked with a better group. They are genuinely interested in improving their lives and improving their English skills.”

The program is free to the students, and this year is funded through a $65,000 grant from the Public Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council, UCSB and a number of other nonprofit organizations. The program directors would like to bring ARC back to Santa Ynez next year if funding comes through, Ms. Gurecki said.

From 6 to 8 p.m. on Aug. 1, the students will read their poetry aloud to the community on the lawn of the Wildling Art Museum.

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