

Young Men's Initiative helps boys become men

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With few positive male role models in Cutler/Orosi, the Young Men's Initiative aims to fill the void and produce courageous young men.



(Photo: Teresa Douglass)

Eddie Valero returned to Orosi after living on the East Coast for 10 years while he went to college and graduate school. What he noticed when he came home was an alarming trend at his Alma mater, Orosi High School.

The boys were way behind the girls, he said.

Upon his return, he ran for the school board and won. In that capacity, he attended graduations and student recognition events. There were few outstanding male students.

"There is a decline in male leadership," he said.

He blames a lack of enthusiasm in school on a fatherless generation.

Many Cutler and Orosi fathers are either absent entirely or absent most of the time because they work early in the morning until late at night, he said. Some are in prison, others in gangs.

Valero, 32, started the Young Men's Initiative a year ago to help fill a void in young men's lives.

About a dozen high school boys meet for four hours on a Saturday once a month. Valero brings in a keynote speaker and organizes related activities. He leaves time for reflection and planning future projects. Each time they meet, it's in a different location.

"You have to keep them engaged and surprised," he said. "We meet at different locations to keep the momentum going."

One time they met at a park, played volleyball and had a BBQ. In between monthly meetings, members of YMI hang out together and work on community projects.

For example, YMI gave away 700 pumpkins to elementary school children, served food to veterans, built a float for the Veterans Day Parade in Cutler/Orosi and prepared meals for homeless people at a shelter in San Francisco.

"I want to educate them about poverty and inequality in other parts of the state as well as here at home," he said. "It was an eye-opening experience."

He wanted to teach to understand the differences and similarities between rural and urban poverty.

In July, a dozen YMI members delivered 10,000 new recycling containers to Dinuba residents as part of a work project for Pena Disposal. Afterward, Pena Disposal donated \$10,000 to the organization and threw a pool party for the boys.

A brotherhood

When Jaime Amaya, 17, joined the Young Men's Initiative in Orosi, he made sure his younger brother, Omar, 14, joined, too. Jaime Amaya agrees with Valero that there's a lack of positive male role models in the Cutler-Orosi area.

"The only father figures we have in Orosi are gang members basically," he said.

There's some pressure to join gangs in Orosi because it's a small town.

"If you end up being their friends, it's hard to not become a gang member," he said.

At YMI gatherings, the boys talk about their problems and try to come to some resolutions.

"We try to help each other out," Jaime Amaya said. "I never imagined joining a club like this."

For the 11 men who joined YMI last year, it's been one new experience after another. Valero introduces them to mentors who each offer different qualities to emulate.

One mentor, Guillermo Moreno, the principal at Golden Valley Elementary School, offers the boys a father figure, Valero said. Another mentor, George Valdez, teaches them how to maneuver around life's detours such as when someone leaves the family. A female mentor, Jenny Eames, brings a feeling of peace and calm to the boys' sometimes chaotic lives.

A fourth mentor, Emilia Villagomez, encourages them to be true to themselves as individuals.

Leadership

As a mentor himself, Valero offers the boys leadership skills. While in high school, he was elected junior class president, served on the school board as a student representative and competed in Mock Trial.

"I was always given the spotlight," he said.

During summers, he participated in special programs at Yale University and UCLA and he took classes at College of the Sequoias in business law, sociology and public speaking. He finished high school in only three years, graduating in 2000.

Since then, Valero graduated with honors from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York with a bachelor's degree in Urban and Regional Studies, a master's degree in Education and is currently finishing up his doctorate there in Learning, Teaching, Social Policy within the field of Education.

He said he doesn't need to be at Cornell to finish his dissertation on the topic of how school architectural designs affect student cliques. So he returned to Orosi in 2012, was elected to the school board and is helping his parents at their restaurant, Me and Martha's in Dinuba.

At first when he came home, he taught classes at Fresno Pacific University and Fresno City College. He noticed the young men in his classes didn't speak up in class.

"There was a silence in the classroom from the young men," he said.

The silence inspired him to take time off from teaching to develop YMI. This new organization doesn't follow a curriculum and is not evidence-based, he said. But by following a more qualitative approach, YMI is able to have more impact on its members.

He said he wants to develop the boys into the next generation of courageous young men.

Making a difference

The YMI has produced results including having one member's juvenile record cleared.

"It inspires me seeing them going into a different direction," Valero said.

To help raise money for YMI, Valero wants to turn a dining room at his parents' restaurant into the YMI Cafe and Pastry Bar where the young men could work. By working with the general public, they would learn about hospitality, management and how to speak to the public.

They could earn money for themselves and for YMI, Valero said.

For 16-year-old Juan Robles, YMI inspires him to see his own potential, he said. Being a member of YMI is like being part of a brotherhood.

"We all bond," he said.

When asked if YMI needs anything, Armando Lupian, 15, said it could use more diversity. For the most part, the young men are cut from the same cloth, he said, each from Latino farm-worker backgrounds.

Lupian has lived most of his life in Orosi, arriving as a baby with his mother from Mexico.

He has big goals, which he admits could change. But for now, he has his eyes set on a double major in college of engineering and pre-medical.

The YMI has made a difference in Andrew Alvarez' life.

"It introduced me to my future," he said.

"I want to become some of these people," he said.

Role model

One person who impressed Alvarez was Chris Chapman, executive director of the Office of African American Male Achievement at Oakland Unified School District. His message is "Anyone can do anything," Alvarez said.

At one of YMI's first meetings, Chapman was a keynote speaker and later, YMI traveled to Oakland for a 4-day workshop with him. Chapman inspired Alvarez.

"He has a lot of pride in what he's doing," Alvarez, said. "That drive has kind of rubbed off on me."

Alvarez, a 2014 graduate of OHS has worked in the fields. When he received his first check, he said he didn't like to sign his name to the back of the check.

"One day, I made a goal that I will be handing out checks," he said. "I want to own my own business."

Likewise, Valero has big plans for YMI.

He said he would like to grow YMI into a statewide organization with chapters in other counties. It's his dream to become executive director of YMI when it becomes a 501c3 nonprofit. Currently, YMI operates fiscally under Lali Moheno's nonprofit The United Women's Organization.

"Even though I have not been paid for this, this has been my passion," Valero said. "My heart is to make this grow."

How to help

To sponsor the Young Men's Initiative, contact Eddie Valero at 799-4359. For more info, go to www.ymigroup.org (<http://www.ymigroup.org/>).

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