



# Mentors That Matter

Mentors That Matter is a national project in which youth from four United States cities publicly honor the adults who matter in the lives of teenagers, beyond the home and classroom.

Sponsored by MetLife Foundation, Mentors that Matter is an initiative of What Kids Can Do, Inc., a national nonprofit whose mission is to bring forward the voices of youth about their lives and learning.

Starting in January 2007, three tenth-grade English classes at Leadership High School ([www.leadership-high.org](http://www.leadership-high.org)) took on the project, as did six students from Youth Leadership Institute ([www.yli.org](http://www.yli.org)). They identified, interviewed, and photographed people in their communities who reach out to youth in ways that far surpass what their daily routines require. Youth in Tampa, Chicago, and Providence carried out the same work.

The Teen Center of the San Francisco Public Library sponsored its culminating exhibition in that city, and at its opening event students presented each Mentor with a medal of honor.

Selected essays and photographs from the exhibitions in each city appear in the book *Pass It On: Interviews by Youth with Mentors That Matter* (forthcoming, Next Generation Press). For more information, contact [info@nextgenerationpress.org](mailto:info@nextgenerationpress.org).

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WHAT  
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WITH THE TEEN CENTER  
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PUBLIC LIBRARY



*San Francisco Public Library*

TOM AHN  
Director,

college access nonprofit organization

Interviewed by ISIDRO FAJARDO  
and EINAR SEVILLA



*“It’s not enough to do something worthwhile—you have to do something that you enjoy.”*

## NOT ANGELS AND NOT DEVILS

I moved from South Korea to here in 1973. In my elementary school class, everybody was Latino except for one Asian guy (that was me), one white guy, and one black guy. Even my friends would make fun of me, or say racist things. I felt like I couldn’t get help, because nobody would understand me. Going to college changed everything for me. I got there and nobody knew me. I could create a new identity for myself.

It’s not enough to do something worthwhile—you have to do something that you enjoy. I like thinking about how people learn and the best way to get young people to do what they need to do. I like working in a place where we all work as a team. I like dealing with people, planning, being creative about how to run different programs and raise money. The reasons why some people are rich and some people are poor are not legitimate. It’s almost dumb luck. That’s almost the worst thing in the world: how wealth gets distributed unequally.

You guys are not angels and you’re not devils, you are people who are trying to make the best of what you have. Kids do what they need to do to survive. If you have people living in such poverty, then you are going to have dangerous neighborhoods. Bayfund is so you have the skills and the network and the self-discipline to go to college and build a good life for yourself. So you can help other people, and raise your own family if that’s what you want to do, and buy a house, and pay taxes.

Everyone we bring into the program is smart enough. The biggest challenge is to get you guys to have self-discipline and patience and to focus on the long-term goal. If you work hard enough now, you could totally make it. But that’s not the easiest thing for everybody. Sometimes I have to bring bad news or get on your case, but I think I set a good example.

Working with kids confirms for me that most of the world has it all wrong in terms of understanding what’s valuable and what’s not, what’s important and what’s not. Who has potential, who doesn’t—who is worthy of support.

**TERESA ALMAGUER**  
*Coordinator, youth leadership program*  
Interviewed by **JAMES LI**  
and **ALESSANDRA ORTIZ**



*“What motivates me is the potential for us to win so much in a world that’s so unjust.”*

## IF YOU WORK HARD, YOU CAN DO IT

I was a youth organizer when I was younger, so I went from that to youth program director, because it’s something I enjoyed doing. What motivates me is the potential for us to win so much in a world that’s so unjust.

In our program, Poder, youth gain leadership skills they’re going to use for the rest of their lives—with their families, when they go to school, wherever they choose to work. They get to learn about the environment, about racism, about things a lot of schools don’t have time to teach, or aren’t allowed to teach. We team up with one of the schools and do some workshops with their kids, and organize a community meeting.

We live in a very complex world. A lot of us have obstacles, so how do we get through them together? How do we learn and grow together? I try not to be a super-authoritative parent or anything. For teens, one of the most important things is to learn and build leadership skills. The more you learn, the better you’re able to practice everything you learn, throughout your life.

It feels really good to see youth in leadership conditions. Whether it’s public speaking in press conferences, knowing how to test air quality, or whatever, the more people who know those skills, the more the work is divided up. You’re able to put in to any area of your life—as artists, as poets, as organizers—and improve not only your life but that of your family and your community.

All over the world, there are groups doing this type of work, and we need to connect in order to build more power and justice. If we’re dealing with the same issues, we have more power if we work together. I really enjoy when we’re able to work at something as a team, collectively think up a plan, and together have a victory. Last summer, we had about twenty-five to thirty youth who got together to work out the importance of how freeways and diesel trucks affect air quality. The community wins.

I teach from what I know. Then, youth spread out to other youth in their immediate surrounding, their families, their friends. I’m learning as much from you as you’re learning from me, so it creates a relationship of respect and mutual understanding. There’s going to be some victories in our lives, there’s going to be some losses. But whatever it is you want to do, if you work hard you can do it.

**JOSÉ ARNULFO RODRIGUEZ**  
Youth soccer coach  
Interviewed by **ADRIANA CANCHOLA,**  
**ALICIA LEMUS,** and **JOSÉ PIMENTEL**



*“I’m doing something productive for them, seeing them grow up in a great personality, knowing that in the future they will be amazing persons.”*

## THE WAY THEY TRUST ME

In El Salvador it is very hard to find a job or even go to college. I worked in a shop cleaning up and learning how to fix typewriters. I would get out of school at eight o’clock in the night and go to my house. I had a lot of bad influences; a lot of youth in my neighborhood were involved in gangs and some also smoked weed and just didn’t love life. I proposed to the neighborhood director that we create a soccer team for little kids and another one for teenagers, and this is how I started helping out youth.

It was very hard leaving my country, I had to practically start over and learn new things. But my whole family was here and I was the only one in El Salvador. Now I work as a driver for a company called Cintas. I thank God that I have a stable job in which I can help out my family. And I help out youth here in San Francisco by volunteering after work and on weekends as a soccer coach.

I care a lot about youth and I advise them a lot. It has been a little hard at times to help them out, because I don’t speak English. But because of that, I now attend English classes, so I can communicate with those who don’t speak Spanish. I tell them that drugs and being in the streets don’t get them anywhere, that school is the main thing in their life, that life is hard but it’s the way that we all learn and it’s what makes us stronger. I tell them to look at certain programs that might interest them. I offer them the idea to join any sports team, instead of wasting their time doing nothing.

My experiences with the youth have been really good. They treat me like their friend and sometimes like a dad. They really listen to me, and many youth don’t listen to any adult. They show me their thankfulness by studying, getting good grades, and not getting into trouble. The way they really trust me makes me happy. I’m doing something productive for them, seeing them grow up in a great personality, knowing that in the future they will be amazing persons.

Youth are very important to me because they are the future of tomorrow. If they don’t study hard, in the future there would only be poverty. When I was growing up in El Salvador, I learned from my teacher to be original—just simply be who I am. Life is beautiful and we should acknowledge that, day by day.

**INES BARBOSA**  
*Youth adviser,  
college access organization*  
Interviewed by **BERTHA MEDINA**



## FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

I grew up bilingual, and where I grew up there was not a lot of Spanish speakers. Early on, when I was around eight or nine, people at school asked me to translate for people coming from Mexico mostly. Teachers said, “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.” But I thought, “I can help them, so why not help?” So I started tutoring pretty early on.

I was the first in my whole family to go to college. We were poor. At times I couldn’t even go on school field trips, because my parents didn’t have lunch money for me. Not a lot of people from my high school and my community went to college. My mom didn’t even finish elementary school, so she couldn’t help me with any of the college stuff. My dad didn’t want me to go to college and live on my own.

I had a French teacher and an English teacher who told me that I definitely should apply to college. There was a club that I was a part of, that took us on college visits. That got me thinking about college, and thinking what I wanted to do.

It’s been important for me to make the world a better place. Before I went to college, I wanted to be a lawyer. After I went to college, I figured out I didn’t really want to be a lawyer. They might be able to do good, but their day-to-day work is very boring. I figured that education is the best way I can contribute. College is the best way to bring social justice to underserved communities.

The organization that I work for, Bayfund [Bay Area Youth Fund for Education], provides college counseling and makes sure students are on track with their classes, to even be eligible for college. I like working with high school students. It’s a very exciting time, where they’re making life-changing decisions, sometimes with very little information. They have a lot of pressure, whether it’s from gangs or from family members who don’t understand why college is important. I hope students see me as a friend and a resource, somebody that they can call when they have questions, whether about school or personal stuff. I would like to help ease that transition from childhood to adulthood.

I think sometimes we don’t take teenagers seriously enough, because we think they don’t know anything. Those are the people who we should be paying the most attention to, because they are future adults and leaders. Eventually we are going to be getting old. We are going to have to depend on your generation.

To see kids get in college and graduate and have their family is really satisfying. I supported them in some hard times, and their lives have really changed. They made their dreams come true.

*“It’s been important for me to make the world a better place.”*

**DANNY CHAO**  
Youth worker, YMCA  
Interviewed by **LUISA SICAIROS**



*“There are days when you feel that  
you’re not making a difference,  
but you are.”*

## **LITTLE MONSTERS**

I came to the United States at the age of six and I’ve been in San Francisco ever since. I grew up in the Tenderloin district of the city. It’s been more than fifteen years.

From the time I was eight years old until I graduated from high school, I wanted to be a professional baseball player. I really didn’t see myself working with children until I started working with children and youth.

I would have never expected to do what I am doing now. I thought I wasn’t any good with kids. Kids didn’t like me, and I didn’t like them. They were like little monsters running around. But I guess fate or destiny brought me to this job, and it’s been really awesome. It’s a give and take relationship. It’s never a one-way street because they make me a better person as well.

Most teenagers don’t see adults as anybody to talk to. It has to take a while to gain people’s trust. When teenagers do talk to me, I listen and share some of my wisdom, which is not much. That’s where connections get made. There are days when you feel that you’re not making a difference, but you are.

Respect, you don’t get it right away. You earn it. It’s all worth it just by youth coming up to me and saying thank you. They’re no longer little monsters—we just got used to each other.

ANDRES FERNANDEZ  
*Capoeira teacher*  
Interviewed by EDWIN LARA



*"I always wanted to reach out to young people. Capoeira gave me a method to do it."*

## I'M RIGHT WHERE I WANT TO BE

I came into this country from an immigrating family. It was six, seven of us on a street corner, living on a couch. I became a man when I was six years old. That's when I remember making adult decisions, and I felt my childhood just disappear. My goal was to make it and live the next day.

Ever since I was little, I've always lived in my mind. I believe strongly in imagination. What would it be like to reach to the moon? The imagination grew, and now the moon isn't that big of a deal, now it's Mars. Imagination is what makes us desire and reach things, throughout history.

I always wanted to reach out to young people. Capoeira gave me a method to do it. I was 20 or 21, and I was pretty much lost. Then I came in to a class and saw the way the kids were responding to the art, to the movements, to the discipline. Capoeira is a Brazilian martial art, a dance that slaves brought from Africa to Brazil. They used it to pass the time, and people started adding kicks, punches, back flips. It became this amazing martial art. And it just triggered a light in me. I was the oldest in the class, double the average age, and I'm learning along with them.

Now I teach capoeira at the Mission Cultural Center. I have a lot of at-risk kids with low self-esteem. Through the art I can actually help them to have trust and faith in themselves, to find that inner strength that we all have, to prevail against all those forces that try to crush you. I also try to teach them discipline and create a positive network, everybody getting together and working together. I bring a lot of ideas. I'm like a big kid, so I play with them.

Nobody notices how tall they get throughout the year, unless they mark their height on a wall. Wait a year, and you realize you did grow. When you're training capoeira, it's the same way. I see a lot of frustration when people have been with me for about a year. You're getting better and you don't see it. Other people do, but you don't. They don't realize that they are more body-built. I work a lot on that, and on developing relationships and making friends. Being not only honorable and amiable, but the type of person that has weight to their words. You say something, people automatically know you are going to do it.

Right now in the community there are a lot of bad influences. The more you beat people up, the more girls' numbers you get, the cooler you are. The more people you take advantage of, the cooler you are. That's just not good with me. We need the kind of people who actually are cool, and look out for you. That's what I'm working on with my students.

Kids need something to focus them, to bring them back to reality, to get them out of bad influences. They need someone to be there and support them. They want somebody to actually give them the discipline, because that's something they crave. In the Mission, I'm right where I can teach these kids to progress and become an effective community. I'm right where I want to be.

**BEN FLORES**  
*Pastor*  
Interviewed by  
**MAURICIO PONCE DE LEON**



*“I went into the field of counseling because I enjoy talking with young people.”*

## JUST CRUISIN’

At fifteen years old, I would not have imagined that I would be pastoring right now. My father being a farm worker, his mentality was that all you had to do was graduate from twelfth grade. I surpassed what he had in mind for me. In the sixties, there wasn’t a lot of Latinos going to college, but my oldest brother was, and he inspired me. I looked up to him and respected him very much.

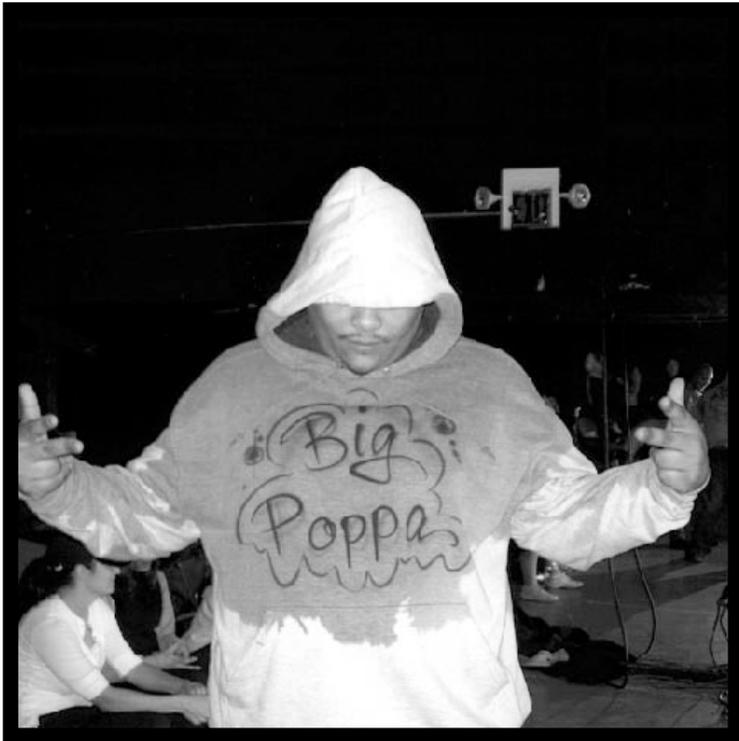
For a couple years, in junior and state college, I was just cruisin’. I was getting average grades and not really learning all that I needed to learn. But there was a mentor that inspired me. He went to major universities and excelled. He said, “You can do better than what you’re doing, you just have to apply yourself.” I went after my bachelor’s degree at Fresno State. I’m glad that I did. It’s sad that there was a lot of Latinos that dropped out of school, in my time.

There was a survey done that said eighty percent of youth today desire to be rich and famous. Yet another survey said that thirty percent of youth can’t handle money. I find that interesting—teenagers want to be rich and famous, but they’re not preparing themselves to accomplish that.

I went into the field of counseling because I enjoy talking with young people. I feel very comfortable when other people share the things that they’re going through. Whenever I confront anyone, I just try to befriend and respect them. I just desire for them to feel comfortable with me. A lot of the problems that I see in youth, it’s not their fault. The father is not in the home to be an example to the young men. Because they don’t have a father figure there, they start looking out in the streets.

You need to be careful who you run with. When I was young, these four individuals and I were friends. As we grew, they began partying too much and got into drugs. That caused me to back myself farther and farther away from them. I found other friends that wanted to go to college and had a different perspective. Some things in life, people do not have to experience. It’s better that you learn from the negative consequences of others’ mistakes.

**ALLAN FRANK FRIAS**  
*Dance instructor*  
Interviewed by **LODY FADDOUL**  
and **ALEX BARKSDALE**



*“If you find something that fulfills your heart and makes you happy, go for it! You’ll regret it if you don’t.”*

## JUMP FOR THE BUS

The dance industry thinks that if you’re not a certain size you’re not a dancer, but I broke that status quo. I proved them wrong. Dance is all about feeling, acting, and personality. Those will take you far. A person could put all their heart into dancing and still not succeed, but a person with more passion for dancing will work harder.

I own a company called Mind Over Matter. I teach three classes a week, all of them hip-hop. There are usually over fifty people taking each class.

What I love about dancing is that it is a good outlet to express feelings and be creative. I can give to people and make them feel better through dancing. I feel they should relax. In dance, they can go wild, because there are no restrictions—no one telling you what you can and can’t do. When dancing, I also get something back. I get my inspiration from other people, and the dancers.

I barely have any free time, but I love being my own boss. Dancing is my life. Even when I try to relax, I end up dancing. I want to grow and learn, and stay in the entertainment business. It’s always been a hassle running my own company. But I finally know how to deal with being busy all the time. I’m happy; I wouldn’t change a thing.

Follow your heart. When you’re unhappy with something, it’s up to you to make the change. You’re responsible for your own happiness. When someone tells you that you can’t do something, use that to motivate you to prove them wrong. You can do anything you put your mind to. If you find something that fulfills your heart and makes you happy, go for it! You’ll regret it if you don’t. There are some opportunities that don’t come around like a bus, every fifteen minutes. Jump at every opportunity that comes around.

**IRENE GARCIA**  
*Dancer and teacher, Bolivian dance group*  
Interviewed by **PRISCILLA FALLAS**  
and **LAURA RUBIO**



*“If people like me, people in the  
community, can push—and say,  
‘No, you can go even a step farther’  
—then it’s worth it.”*

## KNOWING YOU MADE A DIFFERENCE IS ALWAYS A POSITIVE THING

I’ve always wanted to help people, especially people who grew up just like me. Very traditional families from immigrants or first generation have high standards of how teens’ lives should be here, which is of course very different from their homeland. My parents’ expectations of me, and my expectations of myself trying to fit in, made it kind of difficult.

I kinda regret some of the decisions that I made. When I was in high school, having a high G.P.A. and thinking about college was the last thing on my mind. I didn’t care for anything. My brother was in a gang, and I had to learn the hard way that you don’t have to see that as a way out. You have to learn from your mistakes; I did. My brother taught me that you have other options out there. Now I go to school at Cal State East Bay. I work for the San Francisco Unified School District, and I am working on my internship to be a social worker to work with children and families.

I definitely lied a lot because of my mom’s expectations. I didn’t feel like I could be open with her, like I wanted to be. I’ve had to learn to be honest with myself. If I can’t give myself advice or be honest with myself, there’s no way I can trust in teens. Sometimes they’ll call or just walk up to me and ask for my advice or opinion. I’ll try to give them not what they wanna hear, but whatever I feel is the best answer.

If I’m not at school and I’m not at work, I’m practicing with the dance group Bolivia Corazon de America. I joined it in my senior year in high school, and I have been in it ever since. I don’t want you guys to go down the wrong path and feel like you have nobody, so I try my best to be there as much as possible. Knowing that you guys are out there doing something great, because of something I said or did, is always a positive thing.

No teens are going to be exactly the same. We have a lot of you out there that are making really good choices, really trying to make a difference. If people like me, people in the community, can push—and say, “No, you can go even a step farther”—then it’s worth it.

**ALEXANDRA HERNANDEZ**  
Prevention program coordinator  
Interviewed by **ALYSSA PIAZZA**  
and **ANGELINA ROMERO**



*“It’s important to be grounded in who you are, to take pride in where you come from and what you represent, and then to share that.”*

## **MORE THAN A JOB, A MISSION**

I came to the U.S. in 1984 after a civil war in my country, Nicaragua. I was nine years old. I came from a monolingual Spanish-speaking family, and so I was starting to become assimilated to their culture. In my mind, I had two ways of thinking about things: my own way, and the way my parents thought. Then I had the new way, the “American” way.

I tried to think of things in an analytical way. I remember my friends and me spending a lot of time debating about politics, like the North American Free Trade Agreement that was really gonna have an impact on our trade with Mexico. Proposition 87 came up around that time, when I was in high school. And later Prop 21, the one that criminalized young people as adults for some offenses. I was active in the walkouts against that, in that time. I started doing advocacy in the Mission District, organizing young people around the issues that affected them in their community.

It became for me more than just a job. It became a mission. Being a young Latina woman in the Mission, I felt really passionate about my culture and my heritage, and about the needs of my community. I saw how my community in some ways was disadvantaged and isolated. I wanted my work to be meaningful beyond just the position and the money.

It’s important to be grounded in who you are, to take pride in where you come from and what you represent, and then to share that. That’s my role in life, to give something back. I came out of this place that’s gone through so much. I am a really strong person because of all that growth and experience.

That’s why I think adults should work with young people. They make up our community just like children and parents, seniors, and adults. Sometimes certain segments of our community tend to be forgotten. When things like that happen, we see problems arise. When you’re young, you need to have a person to look up to.

My best moment is when I see a young person I work with overcome their fear of public speaking, or get appointed to a position of decision-making power, or be celebrated in formal or informal ways.

Sometimes when you get older, you get really jaded. But I learned from my youth that you can embrace your dreams and your life in a way that is idealistic and very optimistic. There is a young person in all of us.

**EDITH LEWIS**  
*San Francisco police officer*  
Interviewed by **BRITTANNY TUCKER**



*“That’s my passion—to try to reach them,  
to teach them, to help them  
believe in themselves.”*

## PASS IT ON

I grew up in Chicago, on the South Side, and also in San Francisco—the Western Addition, the Alemany housing projects, and the Potrero Hill housing projects. I went to school at Woodrow Wilson High, with predominantly African Americans, Latinos, and Samoans. I was a pretty good student, very involved in sports and school activities. I had a job after school at the Park and Rec facility. It was a community, family, village type environment. Someone helped me, so I knew I had to pass it on.

When I was living in the housing projects, I always took time out to play with the younger kids, taking them to the park, the movies, the store, telling stories, playing games. It just carried over when I became a cop. I’ve been working with kids throughout the whole city for the last eighteen-plus years, saving as many as I possibly can. I work with babies all the way up to eighteen, nineteen years old.

Sometimes kids put up barriers. They don’t want to give you the chance to know them, because they’re hurting for whatever reason. Maybe they don’t trust me as an officer, or as an adult, or as a female. They think that we were not kids at one time. They wanna do things their own way, without any help.

That’s my passion—to try to reach them, to teach them, to help them believe in themselves. I just like being in the presence of young people, it doesn’t matter what age or nationality, or what group people want to categorize them in. I like seeing that they’re doing well, that they’re trying to better themselves.

I can be driving down the street and people be yelling, “Hey, Officer Lewis, remember this or that?” Kids thank me. They’re like, “You were the only one that really cared.” I tell them that I wasn’t doing my job to be mean, but to make them understand: I had a job and they had a job, and my job was to make sure that they went to school and to class.

When you help a kid, at the end of the day, hopefully they’ll be able to pass it on. Maybe you take time just talking to them, sharing a story, listening to them, crying with them, or just taking them somewhere where they can talk to you, one on one. Whatever I give them, I tell them to pass it on to the next generation.

JAMES DEAN MCGARRY  
*Teacher, activist*

Interviewed by CATHERINE EVERETT  
and CLAIRE SWARTHOUT  
Photograph by CATHERINE EVERETT



*“Embracing compassion means putting yourself out there at risk, choosing fewer material rewards.”*

## A WEB OF GOODNESS

My first experience of social injustice in the world was when I was twelve years old, when the Watts riots happened in Los Angeles. Those events, and the analysis about why they happened, had a big influence on me. Within a couple of years, by the summer of 1968, I was doing my community service with the African American community and tutoring projects. It was one of the best experiences of my life.

When I was in graduate school, I worked with the United Farm Workers on the Gallo wine boycott. Cesar Chavez and others really inspired me. Over the summer of '93, I was able to go to Croatia in the middle of the Bosnian war and work with refugees. Did I make a difference? Well, it's a whole web of goodness that we need to weave in our world. I hope I've woven a few strands here and there.

Teenagers have a tremendous capacity for moral imagination—and hopefully also for intellectual curiosity, although that's the tougher one. Students can get outraged about injustices, and that's key. And they can get intrigued enough to want to figure out what's right and what's wrong in a tough situation.

The main problem with most power in the world is that human beings put themselves as God. Religion reminds you that you are not God. That's a pretty good start, because you can really do peacemaking in an appropriate, humble, and nonviolent way. I mean, the ultimate way to play God is to kill other people.

My message to teenagers would be to avert complacency and to embrace compassion. I think that our government particularly wants us to be complacent, and so do the corporations that want to sell us things. They want us to settle for those things as our route to happiness. I'm trying to get students to read as much as possible, and talk and study. That's a little hard, given the distractions that we have in the media, and the pre-professional channeling we do in schools.

Embracing compassion means putting yourself out there at risk, choosing fewer material rewards. Choosing to really be there, in solidarity, and strategically, with those who are suffering.

**JOSÉ OCHOA**  
*Volunteer athletic coach*  
Interviewed by **FERNANDO MIGUEL**  
**RAMIREZ** and **EDWIN SILIEZAR**



*“I believe they listen and respect me because I show them I care and love them, no matter what they do.”*

## A COACH IN LIFE

We live in areas where it's hard for the youth to be acquainted with leaders. When I was younger, I never had to worry about gangs and drugs as much as you guys have to now. I hear stories now where teenagers are mugged, stabbed, or killed just for simple little things. It's sad and it hurts me to know my kids are vulnerable. I was able to walk down the streets with my friends to go play soccer in parks all over town.

I started by coaching soccer, basketball, and baseball with the kids my son went to school with in third grade. They were young, so it was easier to persuade them onto the right path. It wasn't about just being there for them to play a sport, and not be sleeping or on the streets. I set goals and standards. I started to become a part of their lives slowly.

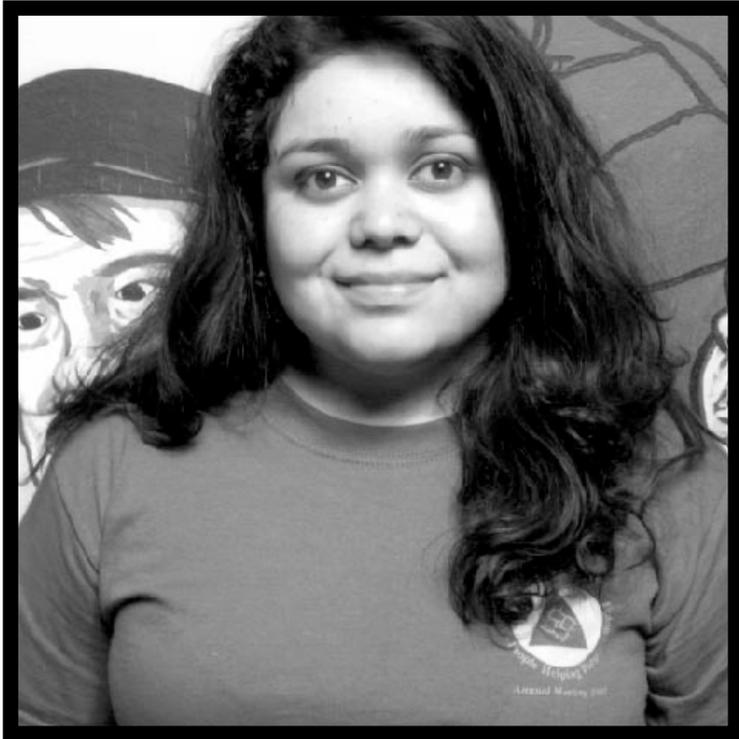
I stuck with those kids up until they graduated. I feel like I had something to do with that. I wanted to give them something for the future. I wanted them to be able to handle working with others, to have that discipline and that skill.

I work eight to ten hours a day as the manager of a windows and doors company. Sometimes work can get demanding, but I never gave up trying to balance out my life and help out the youth. I didn't want to come across as a failure or loser to my players, my kids. That was the opposite of what I was trying to teach them.

Young kids never always want to listen to you. I had to be tough yet caring at the same time. I ask my players every time I see them if they've done their homework and if they have been behaving well. I believe they listen and respect me because I show them I care and love them, no matter what they do. I found out how important it was to have someone there for you.

I feel very proud of what I've done over the years. I didn't just teach students and players. I taught a whole group of my new children. I am proud to see that most of my original players still call me coach. In a way, I became a coach in life.

**CELINA RAMOS**  
Youth credit union  
program coordinator  
Interviewed by **JOSHUA POONER**



*“I’m creating an environment where they can feel free to talk about anything.”*

## BEANS AND RICE FOR DINNER

I learned early that it’s an essential thing to save money. My sister and I come from a single-parent household. My mom worked every day in a restaurant, from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. She worked all her life just to provide for us. We lived really tightly; my mom was really careful with her money, but she wasn’t able to save for us. We went to live in Salvador for a little while, because of our money situation. But after thinking it through she decided to come back, because she knew that we would be better off in the long run, even if we were eating beans and rice for dinner.

When I was about seventeen, I moved into low-income housing. The community center right next to it wanted youth to participate in creating a new program, and my mother forced me and my sister to go. I was the oldest youth they had, so I became the leader, developing programs for young people—arts, academics, how to apply for college, stuff like that. I got my beginning working with young people there.

Our youth credit union program revolves around economic development. It’s important for young people to know how to handle money, because schools don’t teach that kind of stuff. It’s not a requirement to learn how to balance checkbooks, or how to save money early. Unfortunately, a lot of families are trying to make their dollars stretch to pay rent and buy groceries. It’s difficult for them to start saving money, and they don’t tell their children to start saving. If we want our young people to become adults that manage their money the right way, it’s important that they know how to do it. Just a little saving can help you in the long run. It breaks the cycle of poverty, of thinking that you have to spend the money that you have.

Working here has actually made me improve my own way that I handle my money. If you don’t save money, how can you tell other people these things? Now I have to get busy with my own stuff and make sure that it’s structured.

I think I always had a good connection with young people. It doesn’t just revolve around money. If they have other issues, then we can’t work on the important issues that we focus on here. So we need to talk about those other things, too. Sometimes they need help figuring things out—family, gangs, sexuality. All of them are really responsible, and they know that I’m serious about wanting to help. I’m creating an environment where they can feel free to talk about anything. I would love to keep doing it for a long time to come.

I would like to bring closer the youth, the adults, and the elderly of the community. Parents and elders can create change in the community, by learning new things. When they look at youth and see what their situation is, they stay connected to what’s happening.

**JASON STANDIFORD**  
Youth adviser, college access organization  
Interviewed by **BRIAN BARRAGAN,**  
**MIGUEL MARTINEZ,** and **BRADLEY PEREZ**



*“I’ve always wanted to give something back to the community, so I jumped at the opportunity of working with kids.”*

## WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

I was the worst student ever. I didn’t care about school, I didn’t want to go to college. I barely graduated junior high and high school. I was about twenty, working and studying to be a car mechanic, when the owner of the dealership drives up and says, “Take my truck and go pull some weeds at my house.” As I’m pulling weeds, I got really mad. I thought, If I don’t get an education, then I’m going to be pulling weeds all my life.

I quit right then, and the next day I went to enroll in some college classes. Four and a half years later I graduated, and here I am—working two jobs, doing a bunch of stuff on my own, starting my own company. I’ve always wanted to give something back to the community, so I jumped at the opportunity of working with kids. Someday I want to have kids, and it’s a good way for me to figure out how kids think and work.

I really like what they do at Bayfund [Bay Area Youth Fund for Education]. They take smart kids who for some reason just didn’t have a level playing field. They stick with you from junior high all the way through college, and they’re doing it one kid at a time.

It is rough, I know, being in high school. The changing and all the stuff that is going on can be overwhelming. Kids are wanting to be adults so fast that they are forgetting how to be kids. I can talk with kids about the troubles that I went through in high school. They go, “Oh, yeah, I’m going through the same thing.” And I’m like, “Okay, that was hard. Now you’ll get through it.”

I always have been so flaky, but right now I’m really working on being consistent, doing what I say I’m going to do. When I decide to plug into somebody, I make sure I spend time. A couple of people I had under my wing from back then still call me today.

Given the proper encouragement, kids will always surprise you. Like any other relationship you have in life, sometimes it’s frustrating, sometimes it’s fun. Sometimes you feel good about yourself, and sometimes you feel like you’re not doing a good enough job. I’ve learned a lot. Kids are pretty resilient and headstrong, they do what they want to do. They are a lot smarter than we give them credit for.

When I was growing up, you didn’t know what was going on around the world. Now, it’s so globally connected. I’m hoping kids realize that this isn’t just San Francisco, this isn’t just California, this isn’t just America. We’re all in this together.



**REV. MICHAEL VIGIL**  
*Youth minister and counselor*  
Interviewed by **RENE ONTIVEROS**

*“Most of the bondages are  
in their mind. They don’t see the  
opportunities out there.  
I let them feel they are important,  
and not neglected.”*

## THE ONLY THING THAT CAN STOP YOU IS YOURSELF

I was raised in church, starting at the age of ten when I moved to live with my father. I was taught not to only think about myself but also think about others, pretty much following the model of Jesus. At the age of thirteen, I got caught up in gang violence and started selling drugs. As time passed, I seen the life style. From the values, principles, and morals my father taught me, I started to change my life, second semester in senior year.

People motivated me to become a reverend. I’m associate pastor at Victory Outreach Church, where my father is the pastor. I direct the men’s recovery home. I’m in charge of a puppet ministry for kids and preteens. And I’m a youth counselor at Ralph Bunche Continuation High School, in West Oakland. There, I also teach two advisory classes, dealing with issues that teens go through. We discuss their problems—peer pressure, having a hard time studying—and help them go through it. I give them one-on-one counseling, I help them with their homework, and I encourage them and show them that I’m here for them. We also have other speakers come in, so they can see, “Look, a young person from the ghetto can be something in life besides a drug dealer or a person who gang bangs.”

Ralph Bunche is labeled number two in Oakland as being violent and drug prone. Now things are changing in that school. I have thirty-two challenges, thirty-two kids. Young people are already starting to change the lifestyle that they live.

It’s kind of a big brother thing. One youth lives in a foster home and he has been neglected for so many years. Me just being one-on-one with him, now he is starting to change. He is being more positive. He is starting to have more stamina. He walks with his head up high, he has more dignity. He is becoming a man of courage instead of a man who is weak. He knows he could be something great. He’s never been offered any opportunities in life—just to go to school and back to his foster home.

When I was younger, it was about the money. What I’m seeing from the youth now, they just want to live in a nice civilized home—not to live in a gang environment and a drug-infested neighborhood. Most of the bondages are in their mind. They don’t see the opportunities out there. I let them feel they are important, and not neglected.

I tell all the youth, “I want all of you guys to become greater than I ever was.” Better than what they already are. I try to show them that the only thing that can stop you is yourself.

## ANDREW WILLIAMS

Music teacher, after-school program

Interviewed by MATTHEW DELVALLE,

STEPHANIE ENRIGHT and SAMANTHA ORTIZ



*“There’s surprises every day, whether it’s about somebody’s talent level or just their attitude.”*

## SAVING PEOPLE FROM THE SYSTEM

I hate when people try to be the person who gets to define what hip hop is. I grew up on hip hop, but I fell in love with music before I knew what hip hop was. I learned how to play piano before I learned my ABCs. My piano teacher was my babysitter too, and it was like, sit there and have fun. She had a little keyboard and we color-coated the keys. We wrote the alphabet on the stickers, so playing music helped me learn my ABCs, not the other way around.

Wow! I went through a lot of phases. I never thought I was going to be a professional musician. I was thinking more in terms of what was making me happy, and I wanted to keep playing soccer, playing music. I know a lot of people who’s rich and unhappy—and a lot of people who are broke and happy. I try to help teenagers figure out what they want to do. I call it “saving people from the system.” I like to work with people before there’s a lot of pressure to fit in someone’s machine.

I like to teach, but you can teach in a lot of different settings. I taught sports and community service in high school; I teach music and recording now. You don’t know something unless you know it well enough to teach it. I was sharp when I was in high school. I remember when teachers didn’t know what they were doing.

Younger people carry less baggage. They tend to have a positive outlook. There’s surprises every day, whether it’s about somebody’s talent level or just their attitude. The more expectations you have, good or bad, the more you are going to be surprised.

One of my first challenges teaching teenagers was just getting over trying to be cool. I’m a younger teacher and sometimes you get caught up in kicking it. You know all the words to the same songs and stuff, but sometimes y’all don’t want to listen to me because I look hecka young. That’s why I had to grow my goatee out like this, so y’all respect it.

NAOMI WRIGHT  
Assistant, after-school program  
Interviewed by PRISCA CHENG



*“Working here gave me an appreciation for how difficult it is to be a parent as well as how difficult it is to be a kid.”*

## FRAGILE BUT DANGEROUS

When I was a kid it was a whole different world from what you see now. Now people put low expectations on youths. More people tell them, “You can’t do it.” Everybody can grow. If it’s someone who’s getting an F, he can raise it to a D. They can change and learn how to deal with their anger and frustration. They just lack self-esteem and a goal.

I used to teach youths in the city about the ecology of the Muir Woods. A lot of them didn’t have cars, and most of them had never left the city. It was just great, showing them a whole different world that is only about thirty minutes away. From that, I just realized that I want to work with youth.

Now I am in charge of the day-to-day operations of the after-school program in James Denman Middle School. I live in the Sunset, and it’s weird: You go to different neighborhoods where they put a lot more money and investment in the schools. There’s no lights by our basketball courts, so the kids can’t play after dark. Environment matters; it shows the investment they have in youth. I don’t know if they just have more faith in the youths in other neighborhoods. In San Francisco, they track you from middle school and on to the opportunities you will have in life. I don’t feel it’s fair.

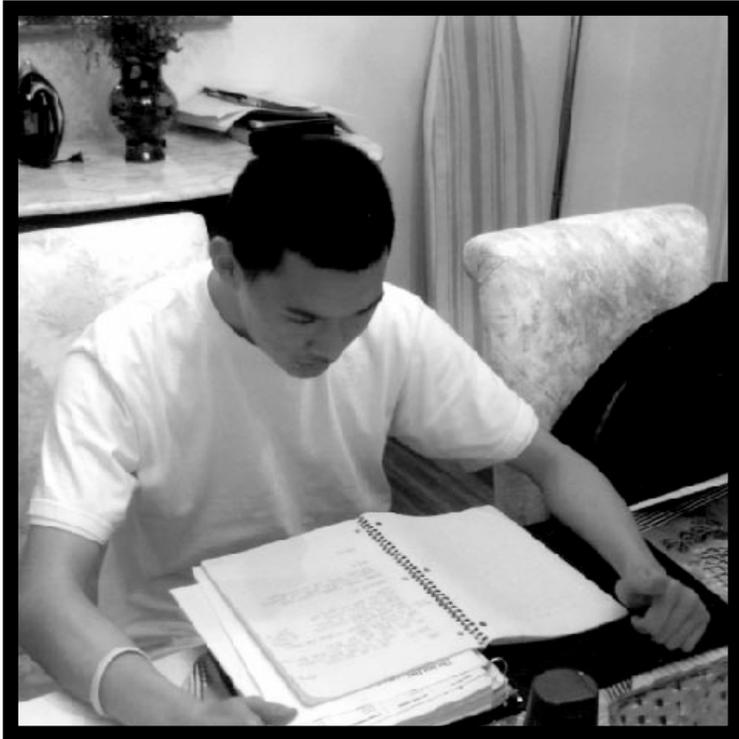
I don’t see a lot of adults stepping up even though they are not parents. Every adult should be helping a child, helping them grow as people. In some way, it is your responsibility. I don’t have kids, but this is just how I feel.

Working here gave me an appreciation for how difficult it is to be a parent as well as how difficult it is to be a kid. When I was a girl, to gain power and be important in the world, your goals were to become a doctor or a lawyer. It seems like young girls now try to get attention or power through dressing. It doesn’t seem like there is a lot of positive influences in youth life today.

I love middle school and high school, because they are able to look at things in different ways. They’re learning who they are as people. They’re fragile and dangerous at the same time, like firecrackers. You set them off, and once you do it is really really beautiful. Everybody can see them shine.

NEILSEN ZULUETA  
*Volunteer tutor*

Interviewed by RICHARD LOPEZ  
and NATHANIEL ZULUETA



*“I love kids, man, ‘cause I used to be a kid. I look out for them.”*

## PASS IT DOWN

When I was back in high school, I used to volunteer for this hospital. I helped the youth come in, I dressed them up, they got surgery, and I helped the nurse. I was really good at math also, so when I get off from school I would help the kids do math. I got a two-hour break before I played basketball, so I just stayed in school and helped them if they had any questions, or any homework.

I was very active in school. I play ball, you know—I hoop. I’d get 3.5 and get with the chicks. Even though my coach didn’t play me a whole lot, I looked up to him, ‘cause he’s like a figure to me. And my counselor helped me a lot to get into college and do my SATs, follow up my grades, and all that stuff. So I thank them for that. I currently go to S.F. State. Then I work at Rite Aid four days a week, trying to earn that paper money.

I love kids, man, ‘cause I used to be a kid. I look out for them. I’ve been through what they see and what they do, so I try to guide them. I don’t want them to go the wrong way, like go to jail and all that. I tell them to just stay in school and don’t do drugs, no alcohol. Nothing at all. I also teach them how to play ball, teach a few tricks and moves. Pass it down, you know. ‘Cause what good is something, if you can’t share it?

When they get good grades and A’s, all the help I gave them paid off. I still know some of the kids. I have work and school, so I Myspace them. They leave me a comment, and I reply.

Helping kids satisfies me a lot—seeing them progress, and seeing their effort. School is important. You’re not going anywhere without education.