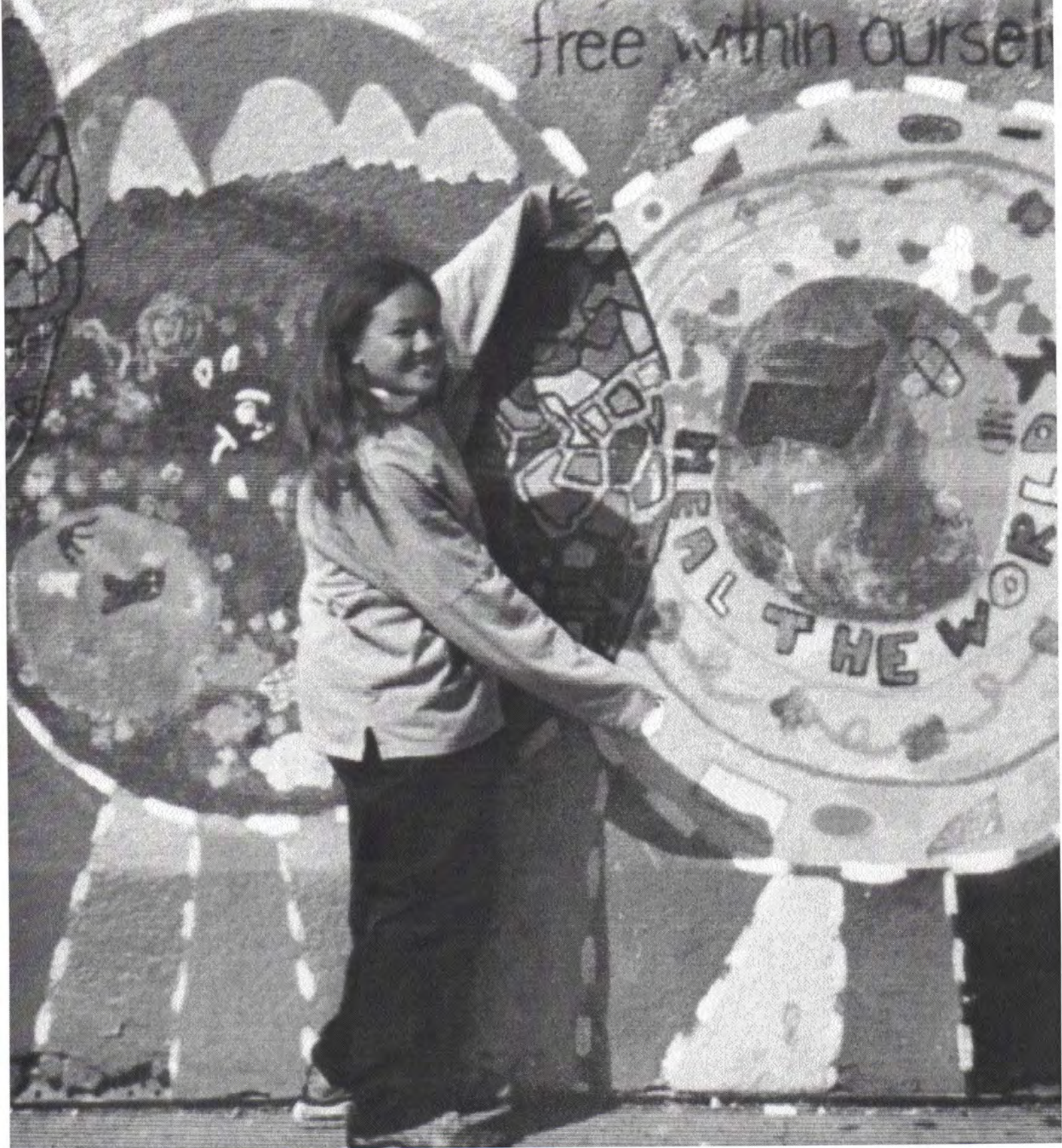


We build our temples for tomorrow  
and we stand on the  
free within ourselves

# The Roosevelt





# It Village Center

**¿Que Pasa? What's up?  
Ni-Hao. Chào! Sok  
Sabye. Yiem Longx Nyie?  
Walk down the streets of  
Oakland's San Antonio  
neighborhood and you  
have a good chance of  
hearing any of these  
greetings and more.**

**L**ocated in Oakland, California, San Antonio is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the city – and perhaps even the nation. The area has been in transition for several decades – first as a historically white neighborhood, then as an African American community. Recently, the San Antonio neighborhood has seen a great influx of immigrants and refugees from Mexico, Central America, East and Southeast Asia, and Bosnia. One of Oakland's fastest growing lower income areas, San Antonio now thrives both with tensions and opportunities as a result of its ethnically varied character.

In the center of the neighborhood sits Roosevelt Middle School, a multilingual, multiracial, and multicultural school of approximately 1,000 students in grades six through eight. The school's population mirrors the neighborhood; just under half of the students are Asian, including a large Southeast Asian refugee population. Latinos and

MURAL PAINTED BY ROOSEVELT VILLAGE CENTER YOUTH AT ROOSEVELT MIDDLE SCHOOL. (PHOTO: MONA SHAH)

African Americans each make up just under a quarter of the school, and a few students come from Native American, Pacific Islander, Bosnian refugee, Middle Eastern and other groups. According to school statistics, Roosevelt's students speak 17 primary languages. Nearly two thirds are English Language Learners and 70% are eligible for free or reduced lunch programs. School achievement data show less than half of Roosevelt's youth scoring at or above the national average on standardized math tests (SAT 9) and less than one fourth scoring that high on reading tests. Teachers say that young people's educational difficulties are often related to linguistic challenges and the fact that parents and caregivers cannot provide sufficient academic help, either because they work long hours and have no time or because of cultural disconnections with the school. In addition, Roosevelt students face short- and long-term neighborhood and personal challenges. As one teacher explained:

*"It's a tough school, and a hard neighborhood. Safety's a big issue, and there's tension between different groups – African American, Latino, and Asian. Kids need something to do so they don't get caught up on the streets or in gangs. And they need some-*

*one to talk to – it's hard for a lot of them to talk to their families about problems. They need some kind of outlet."*

In 1996, in response to these needs as well as to growing concerns about youth violence and truancy in and around Roosevelt school, the community came together to form what is now the San Antonio Village Collaborative, a multifaceted partnership dedicated to strengthening children, youth and families in the San Antonio neighborhood. Over the next two years, the collaborative brought together the voices of nearly 1,000 parents, youth, teachers and service providers in a "listening campaign" designed to identify neighborhood needs, concerns, and desires. Participants in the listening campaign identified two central priorities: supporting young people's academic success and improving neighborhood safety. To address these concerns, the collaborative tapped into an existing citywide initiative to create a "Village Center" at Roosevelt and other services at nearby Franklin and Garfield elementary schools.

The Village Center is based on the "Beacon" community school model. In that model, after school programs, health services, and counseling support for youth and their families are all offered at the school

site. The East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC) oversees the Roosevelt Village Center, drawing on its resources as a multiethnic, community-building organization to serve the community in culturally appropriate ways. This includes academic and personal help in a linguistically supportive setting. The program builds on local resources and parent organizing efforts to support young people in dealing with issues of education, family, and their environment. The collaborative also engages in a variety of school and neighborhood reform projects, always looking for ways to set its academic and youth support efforts in a larger community development framework.

## **AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS AT THE ROOSEVELT VILLAGE CENTER**

Long after the last school bell has rung for the day, Roosevelt Middle School is alive with activity. Groups of students gather to chat with friends, complete their homework, and share stories about the day with lively conversations in Mien, various dialects of Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish, and English. Young people wander in and out of the school's full-time health center, seeking connection with counselors and other sup-

portive adults against a backdrop of posters celebrating cultural, linguistic, gender and sexual diversity. In the auditorium, young hip-hop dancers take the stage, and down the hall several middle school artists are designing a new local mural. Outside, a group of student bicyclists is repairing bicycles and planning for future rides while other youth spill off the campus to nearby San Antonio Park and other gathering spots for music and computer activities.

San Saelee, EBAYC staff member and site coordinator for the Village Center, explains that all these activities are designed to support young people's personal and academic learning, and that aims and opportunities at the Village Center are based on deeply held values regarding both the importance of cultural specificity and the importance of multicultural understanding. The classes and support services are offered by both school-based and neighborhood-based providers, and they operate in a partnership structure led by EBAYC, who holds primary responsibility for designing and administering the program. Each year, the Village Center serves over 600 students and families, and all Village Center programs are free of charge. The following para-

graphs highlight some of the program's central components.

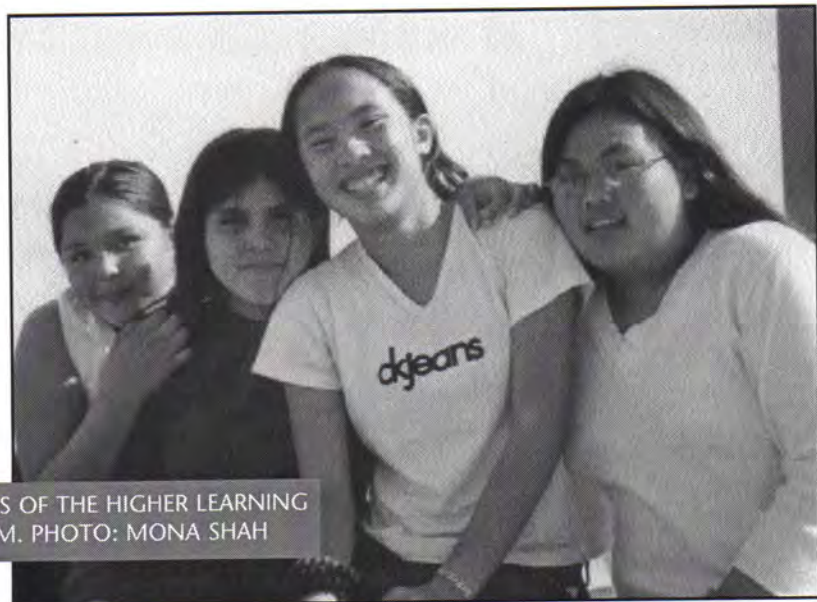
## HIGHER LEARNING

EBAYC's Higher Learning program is the academic and college preparation core of the Village Center's programming. For three hours each school day and continuing through the summer, Higher Learning offers homework and other academic support for 160 Roosevelt students and also provides mentorship, counseling services, and local field trips. The program's cultural demographics mirror those of the school, with roughly 80 Asians, 40 Latinos, and 40 African Americans participating throughout the year.

The goal of Higher Learning, says EBAYC Associate Director Isabel Toscano, is to engage young people in a way that supports

their cultural and linguistic safety and identity development. The program forges cultural connections beyond the confines of school, where only two or three of 45 teachers come from the community, and where many young people are wary of speaking their languages or drawing on cultural resources to support their learning. Students say that the program's ethnic and language specificity helps them feel comfortable and encourages them to reach toward new academic skills and personal relationships. As one eighth grader notes:

*"At school, the teachers don't know you, but at EBAYC they understand you better and you can talk about anything. I guess they have it that way [separated by ethnicity and language] because during school time we are all mixed,*



MEMBERS OF THE HIGHER LEARNING PROGRAM. PHOTO: MONA SHAH

***and after school they put us in our groups so we can communicate in our own language. It is good to be with your own culture."***

The structure of Higher Learning relies on tiered supports. At the broadest level, young people are grouped in clusters of 40 under the supervision of a trained counselor who shares their cultural, linguistic or racial backgrounds. The Asian groups are also split by gender when numbers and staffing permit. Counselors track students' academic progress, provide personal and family support, and work together to monitor the overall Higher Learning impacts.

For day-to-day programming, young people gather in

culture- and language-specific groups of ten to work with academic and personal mentors on homework assignments and other academic challenges, and to discuss personal and social concerns in a culturally safe and appropriate context. Each afternoon, Higher Learning participants meet with their mentors and mentorship groups, moving from a diverse, sometimes tension-filled school day to a comfortable, ethnic specific classroom environment. RVC curriculum coordinator Thuy-Mi Dang believes this is important for a number of reasons:

***"Youth these days are very oppressed, and they don't have enough outlets. They're in school all day – some teachers do put energy there, but most of the time they're not able to put their own unique selves into the curriculum. So young people aren't getting very much one-on-one attention. And they don't always get the attention at home either. A lot of times, parents are struggling to make money, and they're not home. Kids have a lot they want to talk about, but no place to let it out at school or home. The oppression leads to low self-esteem, and not knowing who they are. Despite the supposed politics of the Bay Area, there's still a lot of ignorance of different***

***groups. The kids feel this and it really affects them."***

In addition, several Higher Learning participants and their parents have said that speaking their own languages with peers and mentors provides them with a comfortable way to connect with school. For instance, the fact that homework help is frequently provided in a student's home language can free up emotional and practical energy for learning academic concepts.

Although the center does not provide formal English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, parents of Higher Learning program participants say they have also noticed an improvement in their children's English language skills. One reason may be that the small groups provided by the Higher Learning program offer a non-threatening environment where young people can feel safe to speak English, even though it may not be their native language.

From a teaching and mentoring perspective, the culture and language separation featured in Higher Learning provides an opportunity for the young adults who work as mentors to connect with young people through shared cultural experiences. Several African American mentorship groups, for example, use African American popular cul-



PHOTO: MONA SHAH

ture and “rap session” formats to explore aspects of success and achievement. The Asian groups are separated by gender, honoring cultural convention and providing gender specific role models. And one Latina mentor said that her familiarity with Mexican American culture has opened doors for her mentees to freely discuss bicultural identity, relationships, sex, drugs, families, and peer culture.

To coordinate with the school, many of the counselors and mentors meet with Roosevelt teachers on a regular basis. The teachers find that the program offers young people a type of intensive educational and personal support that they themselves do not always have the time to provide in a large classroom setting. Higher Learning staff are also able to help bridge the culture and language gap between teachers and students’ families by communicating with parents about school issues, student progress, or disciplinary matters.

Young people appreciate Higher Learning for the academic and family support it provides, and feel strongly about the benefits of their mentoring relationships and experiences. As one seventh grade Mien student reflected: **“I started coming because I knew I needed help and I**



PHOTO: MONA SHAH

***knew they would help me here. I know that the mentors will take more time to explain things to me than a regular teacher... They can understand us better... It helps to talk to the mentors about how I feel. I let them know about bad and good things. We talk about colleges and go on field trips that help us with our schoolwork.”***

Whether in terms of academics, identity, counseling, or family involvement, Roosevelt Village Center youth, staff, and parents all agree that cultural support is

key in nurturing young people’s success. And in a community as diverse as Roosevelt’s, pride in one’s heritage is an important foundation for both individual and community survival. But as both young people and program staff explain, it is not enough to understand one’s own background; one must also learn about the heritages of others to break down the racial stereotypes, slurs, tensions, and conflicts that arise in school and in the community. It is a testament to the San Antonio community that its young people want to spend time both within and outside their cultures.

Throughout its existence, Higher Learning has sought ways to support cross-cultural exchange from the cultural support structure it has championed. The program has explored several approaches, including weekly cross-group activities and anti-bias presentations. Maintaining quality ethnic specific programming has not always allowed a lot of time for developing new multicultural programs, and the staff hope to expand their work in this area. While new possibilities are developed and efforts refined, young people can find additional multicultural learning opportunities in other Village Center programs.

## CLASSES IN THE ARTS AND OTHER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Along with Higher Learning's academic and mentoring activities, the RVC offers classes in a variety of enrichment areas. Classes in the arts are designed to tap young people's skills, talents, interests and creativity, and to further nurture cultural and cross-cultural learning. One key cluster of these classes is in the visual and performing arts. Run by community arts groups and the Eastside Arts Alliance, a neighborhood arts and activism collective, these classes tie in with the themes of ethnic identity building and community connections. As stated in their brochures, these art classes encourage young people to "share their own cultural traditions, learn about the traditions of their neighbors and ... use the arts as a tool for identifying and expressing their views on the issues which affect their lives and the life of their community."

Young people from all cultures and language groups come together here to learn cooking, acting, hip-hop dance, Ballet Folklorico, Danza Azteca, collage-making, murals, jazz, music video production, Steelpan band, and Capoeira. Local artists teach

the classes and infuse both excitement and a sense of cultural meaning into weekly activities. Most courses begin with basic skill development or exploration of materials, then move toward a performance, exhibit, or finished artistic work. Along the way, young people learn their chosen art form's history and context. They also gain skills such as self-assessment, conflict resolution, and an appreciation for diversity and critical thinking.

Beyond the arts, the Village Center offers other enrichment opportunities. The Cycles of Change bicycling club integrates a bicycle safety and maintenance curriculum with bicycle riding adventures. The Expeditions Club allows young people to expand their cultural knowledge through online anthropological exploration. And the Computer Street Academy offers instruction in writing, online design, and other technology applications.

All of these activities function independently of the Higher Learning program, and Roosevelt students both in and outside of Higher Learning regularly enroll. Higher Learning students may participate in one or two classes per week as a complement to their daily mentoring and academic support, while other students may take as many classes as

they wish.

EBAYC staffer and Higher Learning counselor Dwayne Byndloss notes that the center's arts and enrichment classes play an important role in encouraging young people's educational and personal development, whether taken alone or in combination with the academic support programs of Higher Learning. "Young people need creative expression," he explains, *"...and bringing the arts [and other opportunities] to the community is really important. A lot of students have not had any success in school, for a number of different reasons ... But art allows young people to experience success. And then if they have the right staff there, if they're working with the right artist, that artist is not going to just let them dwell within the success that they've had in that particular art. That artist then makes connections – to school, to life. 'Yeah, you weren't a good dancer when you first started taking this African dance class, you couldn't do the moves. But six months later you can. The same thing applies in school. If you believe in yourself like you believed in yourself during that dance class, and you saw what happened in dance, the same thing could*

*happen in a reading class, or in a math class or in a science class. The same thing can happen in life in general."*

## **SUPPORTING YOUTH IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY**

*"We really wanted to make an impact schoolwide, communitywide, not just on individual students."*

*Isabel Toscano  
Associate Director, EBAYC*

One of the things that makes the Roosevelt Village Center so successful and exciting is the larger vision that everyone brings to their work with youth. This vision sees young people in schools not simply as students, but as members of families, cultural and linguistic groups, neighborhood communities, and society as a whole. In looking for ways to support academic improvement and personal well-being, the Village Center therefore looks not just at immediate concerns but also at family, community, and institutional issues.

This is apparent in the Village Center's design and daily programming – from the initial involvement of parents and community in shaping the program, to the provision of culturally based activities and services, to bridging home

PHOTO: MONA SHAH



and school with translation and communication assistance. The Roosevelt Village Center's work is also an understanding of young people's academic and social challenges in a social, political and institutional context. The center recognizes that educational improvement and personal growth are connected to deeper school and community change. Counselor Dwayne Byndloss explains how after school services are a smaller piece of a

larger whole:

*"In my opinion the school system is dysfunctional. It has been so for a long time. It's underserving our children. We could do all the good work we want to do after school, but if nothing changes within that system, I don't know if we're going to be successful, if the youngsters are going to be successful. So I think that we can't just focus on the youngsters, we also have to focus on the*



*institutions. And I'm not just talking about the school institution but also the family institution and the community. We've got to focus on all those in order to help these young people do well."*

EBAYC's commitment to working at this level leads them to engage in parent organizing and school reform as well as their counseling and support efforts at the Roosevelt Village Center. In a context of high diversity, bringing these pieces together is no small endeavor. It requires attention to the specificity of many cultures and also attention to unifying people across culture and language toward the creation of a larger common good. The Village

Center strives to look in both directions as it works with young people and also with communities.

For EBAYC as an organization and for the RVC as a program, the underlying message is that people in the community can and must come together. Supporting young people's cultures and languages honors their identities and their differences and helps them to build a foundation of pride and self-understanding. In this way, they can stay safe, succeed in their pursuits, and ultimately join across lines of culture and language to help create a thriving multicultural neighborhood. Through the collective efforts of parents, community leaders, teachers, school

administrators, and RVC and EBAYC staff, young people now have a place where they feel that they, their families and their futures are cared for in many ways. As one African American eighth grader reflects on her experience:

*"This is a good program. You get to meet new friends here and get to know the mentors. They make you think about yourself and where you want to be in the future. If you are in trouble, they have something to help solve your problems. They got your back for everything."*



PHOTO: MONA SHAH

