

Tongan youths turn to the field to keep noses clean

By Mike Rosenberg
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Dozens of Tongan youth with troubled pasts from San Mateo and San Bruno engaged in violent scrums Saturday, all with the support and cheers from parents and police.

Approximately 30 to 40 Tongan students from San Mateo and San Bruno high schools stepped onto a San Mateo High School field and played in a rugby game organized by the San Mateo Police Department. According to the police, many of the youths participating in the game have a history of gang involvement, poor school performance or run-ins with the law.

The idea for the rugby teams was proposed by the San Mateo, Burlingame and San Bruno police departments after officers reached out to the kids' parents recently to look for a method to keep the students out of trouble. The Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center's Tongan Interfaith Council became involved, and a rugby team called the San Mateo Warriors was soon born.

After less than two months of practicing, many

school, turn in their work and listen to uplifting messages after each practice in order to play, Brunnicardi said. Most of the players could not play school athletics because they did not have the 2.0 grade point average necessary to participate, said Merilyn Tonga, project coordinator for the Tongan Interfaith Council.

The team is modeled after a similar program that took at-risk Hispanic high schoolers in the area and put them on soccer teams to help them avoid trouble. All the Tongan youths wanted to do was play rugby, Brunnicardi said.

"These kids love it. They totally love the game," Tonga said. "It's aggressive and it's just a head-on kind of game. They get along and work together."

San Mateo County has one of the largest Tongan communities outside of the island nation, said Jennifer Bullock, interim executive director of the conflict resolution center.

After the team's success, the center may consider expanding it to other cities, Tonga said. San Mateo police may also seek out other youth groups after the achievements of the soccer and rugby programs, Brunnicardi said.

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Tongan youth have responded enthusiastically to a police-organized rugby game. — Courtesy photo

of the youths have already turned around their lives off the field, San Mateo Police Lt. Mike Brunnicardi said.

The team has affected the players' lives because coaches require them to show up for