

Kicking into high gear

By Dana Yates



Rolando Rubio/daily journal
Goalie Elmer Ayala, left, 19, practices shots on goal from the thrown position with Coach Leroy Miranda during the Police Activity League practices last week. The program helps at risk youth stay off the streets by creating positive activities for them to invest their time.

A San Mateo soccer team made up entirely of at-risk kids are setting their sights high — shooting for 4.0 GPAs and first place in their league.

And it looks like they'll reach their goals.

Two years ago, the San Mateo Police Activities League decided to take a new direction with at-risk students in the city. Instead of just offering “one-shot” programs like weekend ski trips or Junior Giants, PAL organizers are creating long-term character-building programs that focus on teamwork. That’s when police officers formed a soccer team with San Mateo High School students.

The program is helped by a supportive coach, a dedicated PAL Officer Paul Pak and John Kelly, an 80-year-old retired priest and Serra High School teacher who tutors the boys.

The team practices at school and across the street at College Park Elementary School. However, it plays in a weekend league in which the team took second place last year. Next month marks the first game in the new season and no one doubts the team has what it takes to bring home the top medal. But all that is secondary to the program itself and what it is helping the boys accomplish off the field.

“If I can, I’ll go to college. I’m going to be the first person in my family to go to college,” said senior Antonio Escobedo, who went from a .7 grade point average to a 2.5.

Escobedo was one of two team members honored last month as PAL Youth of the Year. The other was

fellow senior Leonardo Nunez, who raised his GPA from under 1.0 to nearly a 4.0.

“I think I can get there [to a 4.0] by the time I graduate,” Nunez said.

Two years ago, graduation was not a consideration for the boys. Now the entire team is thinking about their futures — whether it’s as a mechanic, in the Coast Guard or at community college.

Kelly helps the soccer team learn English and pass their classes. It’s an unlikely match, but Kelly has always made some unlikely decisions.

Kelly was born and raised in San Francisco, became a Catholic priest and, against his wishes, was assigned to become a teacher at Serra High School. He taught there for 16 years before retiring and “becoming a sort of renegade.” Kelly said after retirement he made his own decision about what he wanted to do, figuring the church needed him “more than he needed them.”

He was later asked to head the Samaritan House of San Mateo County, leading the organization from a small operation to the major nonprofit it is today. When he retired from the position several years ago, he took a trip to San Quentin State Prison. Now he travels there every week to lead prisoners in spiritual and educational exercises.

Knowing the people in prison helps Kelly talk to the kids about making choices that will help them avoid a life behind bars. He even had 10 to 15 men in prison write letters to the San Mateo kids about staying away from gangs.

“The two or three major things I did in my life, I never really planned,” Kelly said.

And how long does he imagine he’ll keep tutoring the kids at San Mateo High?

“Till the day I die. They keep me young,” Kelly said.

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