

Rugby unites community

Tomorrow, in Southern California, the San Mateo Police Athletic League's (PAL's) rugby program will be handed the 2008-2009 Distinguished Program Award by the state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The occasion is the State Juvenile Officers' Association Conference. All of the police and community people involved in thinking up and running the two-year-old rugby program must be beaming.

This isn't a typical PAL program (PAL sponsors activities ranging from ballet to volleyball, with the objective to not only give kids from 5 to 18 years old something to do, but also to build relationships between cops and their communities).



BIL PAUL

Instead, the rugby program was designed specifically to help Polynesian, or Pacific Islander, youth of high school age avoid the downward spiral of becoming gang members.

And of those Polynesians, the predominant group in San Mateo is Tongans.

Like Fiji, Samoa and Hawaii, the Tongan nation in the South Pacific is actually a group of Islands. I'm not sure why so many from these areas immigrated to the United States, and especially to the Bay Area, but assume the reasons are mostly economic and many wanted to join relatives already here. Due to British influences, the Tongan national sport is rugby and they brought this heritage with them.

Unfortunately, some young Tongan men in San Mateo County got into the gang lifestyle for lack of motivation in finishing high school, attending college and getting decent jobs. From East Palo Alto to San Bruno, their crime rate increased and that was one of the reasons the county established a gang task force. In San Mateo, Tongan youth formed the Shoreview Crips and West Side Tongans gangs; and sometimes had it out with the rival San Bruno Baby Gangsters. If these sound like fictional gangs from the musical West Side Story, they're not — there were people killed. Gangs get involved in drugs, weapons and the recruitment of more young people with time on their hands.

Besides being involved in the gang task force, San Mateo's police department and Chief Susan Manheimer decided to become more proactive against the gangs by hiring some officers of Polynesian descent and working through the PAL organization, a nonprofit entity.

One of the officers, school resource officer Keala Keanaaina, came up with the

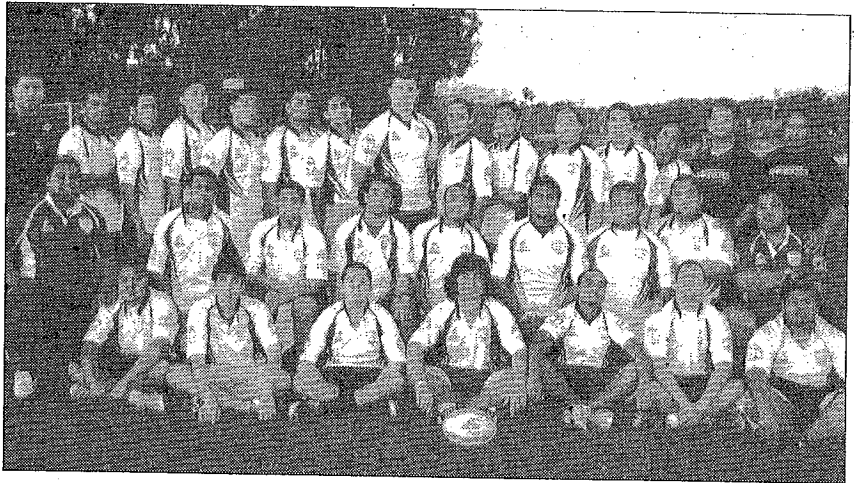


Photo courtesy of San Mateo Police Department

idea of a rugby team specifically for at-risk Tongan and Polynesian youths. He had noticed especially that these youths involved in high school football often lost interest in their studies after football season ended. He reasoned that a PAL rugby team playing in the local Skyhawk league, consisting of school teams, would require that players be students in good standing. He was right. Several Tongan students who had dropped out of school returned to attend adult school to get GED diplomas just to be eligible to be on the rugby team.

The San Mateo PAL rugby team is one of those success stories reminding one of movies that depict sports teams from unlikely neighborhoods that rose to the challenge and competed with the best. The PAL team played against experienced teams from Valley Christian and Bellarmine high schools and a team consisting of players from Menlo-Atherton, Woodside and Serra high schools, among others, and went undefeated for a long stretch. It did lose against the top high school rugby team in the U.S., a team from a Jesuit high school in Sacramento, but that's only a testament to their spirit and teamwork.

What would make a good movie about the San Mateo PAL team is that these players practice and play as a team, even though there may be tensions from past conflicts or even from past gang affiliations or the affiliations of relatives.

On the field, "winning" comes from a commitment to showing up for practices, getting in shape and working as a team, and for some individuals, developing leadership roles. This is in contrast to the gang mentalities of becoming a man by adhering to violent codes of honor, settling scores and being on the other side of the law.

Beyond the police department, the PAL rugby program depends upon the support of

a wide variety of community organizations such as the local high school district, the San Mateo Parks and Recreation Department, the Tongan Interfaith Council, the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center and others. There have reportedly been corporate sponsors such as the Outback Steak House. Fa'a Pacifika, a Tongan community group, donated \$9,000.

The PAL rugby team, the Warriors, though not consisting entirely of teens of Polynesian descent, maintains a cultural identity by often performing a native Hakka dance before games.

San Mateo police lieutenant Mike Brunicardi, who's responsible for the PAL program, likes to say that playing rugby teaches young men to become "champions of life" and develop life skills. He emphasizes that rugby also brings families together, who help support the coaches and bring food and festivities to the sport. PAL Executive Director (and police officer) Paul Pak tells about driving some players home after practice or a game and listening to their problems and aspirations, and forging relationships. Being involved in PAL can even motivate young people to choose law enforcement careers.

One limitation of PAL sports programs, of course, is that not all teens are interested in sports. For example, there are spray-can graffiti specialists who tag gang territories. There could be an art program for them to get involved. The same goes for those into music, auto mechanics and more.

San Mateo's PAL programs actively need contributions of time and money. To help, call 650-522-7725 or visit www.sanmateopal.org.

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