



1:50 p.m.: Los Osos High students have Giving Spirit

Wendy Leung

RANCHO CUCAMONGA - Something strange happened at Los Osos High School this week.

The students, with their leadership skills and activist mindset, acted like adults. The wide-eyed teachers were the impressionable ones, and they found themselves speechless.

"This is the neatest thing ever," exclaimed Spanish teacher Julie Hartz.

In an effort to offer some compassion to the homeless community, a group of Los Osos students has adopted the mission of a Los Angeles-based nonprofit The Giving Spirit. The students wrap up The Giving Spirit week Friday, which included a list of activities that brought representatives from the nonprofit group out to Rancho Cucamonga.

They got a lesson in how dedicated a group of relatively affluent students living 40 miles from Skid Row can be.

"It's mind-blowing," said Tom Bagamane, founder of The Giving Spirit. "If only we can get adults doing this."

Every year, The Giving Spirit assembles kits of food, toiletries and other items for the Los Angeles homeless community. In December, Los Osos students will take part in assembling or delivering these kits with the organization.

"I can't vote in the next presidential election, I'm only 16," said Shalyn Smith, a junior at Los Osos. "I can't vote for a while so knowing I can do something that makes a difference is wonderful."

On Wednesday, members of The Giving Spirit toured the campus which was awash with posters announcing homeless statistics and urging students to donate items for the kits. Some students mimed homeless people during lunch hour, bringing awareness to their cause.

Bagamane warned students that not all homeless people fall into the drunk and lazy stereotypes. Some are college-educated people who got laid off and had no choice but witness their lives turn in the wrong direction, he said.

"The old adage of six degrees of separation ... well, it's more like one degree," Bagamane said.

He told students that while Los Angeles is home to the highest number of homeless people, it spends the least on them.

"I thought I knew homelessness but what I came to understand in a humble fashion is that I don't have a clue," Hartz said. "In the 11 years I've been teaching, this is one of the

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most moving days as a teacher."

Hartz came up with the idea of connecting the students with The Giving Spirit after being inspired by a newspaper article. The popular teacher was moved by the tale of a Virginia Tech shooting victim who had survived and wanted to commit his time to a humanitarian group doing work in Madagascar. After an Internet search, she decided The Giving Spirit was right for her students.

"This is the one club at school that I dedicate all my time to," said Laura Bautista, 15, who spends 2 to 3 hours every day making posters and organizing activities. "I can't wait to go to L. A."

Assistant Principal Tom Mitchell said the students' enthusiasm conflicts with much of the negative stereotypes on the younger generation.

"A lot of people say the future is bleak based on the youth in America," Mitchell said. "But based on the kids at Los Osos, and a lot of the schools in this district, actually, the future is bright."

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