

MERCED SUN-STAR

Dozens celebrate end of program, start of new leadership roles



BY MONICA VELEZ

mvelez@mercedsunstar.com

Last May, Maria Preciado walked into her first class of Merced County's Parent Leadership Training Institute unsure of what to expect.

This week, the 52-year-old Delhi woman was one of 25 local residents who celebrated completion of the program, ready to be better engaged with the community and determined to make it a better place, particularly for children.

"They empower us to see a lot of changes in the community and see there's a lot of agencies that can help with these changes," she said.

The Parent Leadership Training Institute, or PLTI, is a 20-week leadership course funded by a grant from The California Endowment, which partners with the Merced County Office of Education to organize workshops for parents and community members who want to learn about civic involvement.

The class that graduated Tuesday night during a ceremony at the Italo-American Lodge was the third group to complete the program, organizers said.

Graduates were asked to pick one word that described how they felt. Informed, proud and strong were among the adjectives they chose.

"We're here to partner and to create change in the community," program co-coordinator Sol Rivas said.

Classes were offered in English and Spanish to make them widely accessible. Participants also received dinner and could use child care services during each workshop.

The first 10 weeks of the program centered on public speaking and child development education, said Rosa Barragan, another program co-coordinator. The second half dove into civic engagement, learning how government works and how to bring change into the community, she said.

The last 10 weeks, Rivas said, also encompasses "basic components of being a leader" and how to integrate those principles with being a parent.

"They're all leaders already in their communities and we're trying to show them certain tools," facilitator Cesar Vera said. "It's a very structured curriculum. They're not only learning these tools but connecting with other parents to help them."

David Ramos, family services supervisor for the Merced County Office of Education, said they were “thrilled to bring shy introverted parents” into the course and help them blossom. Each participant was required to develop a community project to work on, he said.

The projects “have to be something that will bring change centered around students,” Ramos said. “We want them to make sure they know they have a voice and to be courageous.”

Preciado is working to extend the hours at the Delhi High School library, the only library in the unincorporated community. It closes at 4 p.m., but she wants to extend the hours to 7 p.m. or later so parents can use it after work.

Sometimes the library is the only place for students or parents to have internet access.

“It’s the only library in town and the only place for students to get together,” Preciado said.

She and two other graduates have been working with the county and county librarian to make this happen.

“They advise us and attend the meetings with the county for support,” Preciado said.

Another graduate, 38-year-old Jerome Rasberry Jr., said his experience was “phenomenal,” and after 20 weeks he felt he was a better listener and community member. He said he’s more aware of what’s happening in the community and why.

The skills Rasberry worked on not only translated into his professional life as a youth engagement coordinator in Le Grand, but into his personal life.

“Every parent that has children can benefit,” the Merced resident said. “If you have children, do it. If you don’t have children, do it, because it makes you a better leader in the community.”

Andrea Rodriguez went through the program even though she is a student at Delhi High School. It helped her gain maturity and helped her interact with adults, she said. The 15-year-old said she recommends the program for anybody

as young as 13 because that's the age they're starting to figure out who they are, "and a little encouragement wouldn't hurt."

"Something that I really took away from this is you don't have to be a certain age to be a leader," Rodriguez said.

The program is open to anyone in the community, Barragan said. As long as they continue to receive the funding, she said, they expect to start another cycle of classes in May.

Monica Velez: [209-385-2486](tel:209-385-2486), mvelez@mercedsunstar.com

The Merced Sun-Star's coverage of community health issues is supported in part by a grant from the California Endowment.

Original Article: <http://www.mercedsunstar.com/news/article110708632.html>