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Luis, an Elev8 Graduate, Finds His Pathway to a Successful Future



Luis Reyes was only 10 years old when he came with his father from El Salvador to make a new life in Oakland; it was a difficult transition.

"I was having a hard time with my family. My father had no time for me and my mom was in El Salvador. I spent most of my time with my friends in a gang," he says. "There were rival gangs in the neighborhood. It was hard for me to walk the streets."

Academics were not a priority for Luis as he moved through middle school. But in the 8th grade, Elev8 began operating at his East Oakland school, Coliseum College Preparation Academy. Luis was particularly interested in one Elev8 offering - a History of Gangs program - and he worked hard to bring his grades up to be eligible to take part after school.

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The mission of Safe Passages is to advocate for children, youth, and families with special emphasis on



The Elev8 afterschool programs seek to reconnect youth to school and learning and give young people affiliated with gangs a safe place to discuss their needs. The program opened Luis' eyes to the reality of gang life. "I got to hear from a lot of other teachers, artists and even lifers in prison who talked to me about their own experiences," he recalls, "I also receive a lot of help with my school work."

Luis also took advantage of other services offered through Elev8. "I talked to counselors when I was feeling down," Luis says. "I had a lot of people who cared for me and showed me how to do better."

The hands-on support led to a major turnaround for Luis. He moved away from gangs and by the end of 8th grade had a 4.0 grade-point average. In high school, he became a tutor for younger children and graduated with honors.

Luis is now 18, is enrolled in college. His long term career goal is to become a child psychologist.

"Stay in school. It's everything," he says he tells the young people he works with. "In the end it is really worth it. I was one of those kids that did not like school but now I see the worth. Never stop dreaming."

Holiday Toy Drive Party Hosts Over 600 Guests at Havencourt

vulnerable populations.

We envision a community where all young people have the opportunity to realize their full potential.

Our work is based on the premises that access to educational opportunity, health services, and family support should not be dictated by race or socio-economic status, and that healthy and supported young people are better prepared to learn and succeed.

Safe Passages' strategies span the age continuum of birth through young adulthood and include: Early Childhood, School Linked Services, Juvenile Justice and Career Pathways.

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With the rapid approach of the holidays, thousands of families will have to decide whether to buy food, pay rent, or keep the heat on in their homes. Often, families are not able to afford toys for their children.

Mayor Quan explains, "This year, the government has made cuts to food subsidies for poor families. A family of four will now have \$396 less annually for food. This is particularly difficult during the holidays when parents have to decide whether to feed their families or buy toys for their children."



Every year, Safe Passages provides a happy holiday season to families in need by partnering with the Mayor's Office, Elev8 Americorps, Community United Elementary School (CUES), Coliseum

College Preparatory (CCPA), Oakland Housing Authority, East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation, the Oakland Police Department, and the Oakland Fire Department to host an annual toy distribution party for students and their siblings who attend schools in the Havenscourt neighborhood. This year, over 500 families signed up to receive toys for their children. Over 600 parent and children attended the event.



This year's event marked the Third Annual gathering held on Saturday, December 14th at the Havenscourt Campus and was made possible by generous toy donations from hundreds of Oakland residents, merchants and the Mayor's office as well as the work of over one hundred volunteers. Over five hundred families received toys, participated in games, and danced to an array of music played by Disc Jockey Alberto Murillo. Mayor Quan and Santa Claus- along with Santa's helpers- made surprise appearances and partook in all of the festivities.



"This is a real community affair! The community and the children's joy and smiles are so heartwarming," said Josefina Alvarado Mena, CEO of Safe Passages.



Elev8 Parent Advocates Make Their Mark at National Convening

Several hundred educators, community partners, evaluators and funders gathered in Chicago for the sixth and final Elev8 Fall Learning Institute, held November 13-15th. These stakeholders came together to expand their knowledge and skills, share lessons, and to celebrate Elev8's accomplishments. Learning sessions included robust conversations about varied topics pertaining to community schools, including how to build and sustain a community schools' movement, linking in- and out-of-school learning, school based health in the Obama-care environment, and engaging middle school students in organizing and advocacy.

Safe Passages/Elev8 leaders Vashti Means and Jason Madison, in conjunction with Elev8 Chicago leaders, co-hosted an interactive workshop on Safe Passages/Elev8's Family and Community Engagement Strategies. Highlights of Vashti and Jason's presentation included: the guiding principles of Safe Passages/Elev8's Strategies, including the assets based approach, a continuum of activities that lead to self-sufficiency, the removal of barriers to full democratic participation and social and economic justice, activities in a culturally and linguistic manner, and the focus on integration.

"I feel so welcome at the Family Resource Center. The people there really help me see that I can contribute to my children's education. Before, I did not feel comfortable coming to the school. Now, I work to get all other parents involved," explains Vashti Means, parent of an Elev8 student.



The family resource centers (FRC) at Elev8 Oakland are staffed by Family Advocates like Jason who work side by side with families to first meet basic needs such as food, housing, clothing, and healthcare. In addition, the FRC works to increase education and job opportunities for families.

"Vashti and Jason's presentation really helped me see where and how we can grow into our capacity to support families," a conference participant, said in an interview.

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