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Helping kids avoid gangs

Bicycle club lets them stay out of trouble

By Ralph Montañó - Bee Staff Writer

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Jeff Ghiselin, right, of the NorCal High School mountain bike racing league, rides with students last week at Goethe Middle School. Sacramento Bee/Anne Chadwick Williams

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For several months of last year, Tom Ryan could look out the window of the classroom at Goethe Middle School where he teaches computer applications and see a sidewalk vigil for a victim of gang violence.

"We had one outside of my classroom window and another one down the street," Ryan said. "They were a presence out there for a long time."

The vigils, tributes to two of three victims who were gunned down in Meadowview in late August, were daily reminders of the violence that startled this neighborhood and alarmed city officials.



Ryan said the vigils affected his students. "I thought it wouldn't bother them, but it did. It scared a lot of them, and they didn't like it."

This year, Ryan is involved in a program that he and others hope will help children stay out of gangs. An after-school bicycle club has a membership of about 16 students. It was started last year at Luther Burbank High School and has spread to the middle school.

Officials said it is part of the Sacramento Police Department's Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT), and they hope it will give pupils an opportunity to build confidence and interact with positive role models.

Programs like it were coming into focus last week as the Sacramento area again saw a spike in gang violence. Shootings in one weekend claimed one life and injured five others.

Police have reacted by increasing patrols in problem areas, but they also pointed to long-term prevention programs to counteract rising violence. The bicycle program, which was started by a Sacramento police officer, is one example of some unconventional approaches to the problem.

George Martinez, a school resource officer at Luther Burbank High School and an avid mountain biker, said last year's Meadowview gang shootings inspired him to start the first high school mountain bicycle team in Sacramento.

"It really affected me. I needed to strive for something better for these kids," Martinez said. While attending a racing event in Monterey, he learned about bicycling clubs in other high schools.

Luther Burbank has a mountain bicycle club with a dozen members. They attended their first race event over the weekend.

Tou Her, an 18-year-old senior at the school, is the club's president. He said mountain biking gives him something to do and an opportunity to compete.

"I really have a lot of confidence in myself," he said.

Last week, Sacramento Mayor Heather Fargo attended a news conference highlighting the bicycle program at the two schools. A day earlier, the mayor and council approved the creation of a "youth czar" to help find more preventive measures in stopping youth violence.

"I think this is an incredible example of a program that meets a lot of needs of the students in one program," Fargo said.

Sacramento police Capt. Daniel Hahn said police know that they don't have all the answers when it comes to gang violence.

"It has to be a collaborative effort," Hahn said. "We need to have the parents involved, the students involved, along with school officials and volunteers. These are all the components we need."

About the writer:

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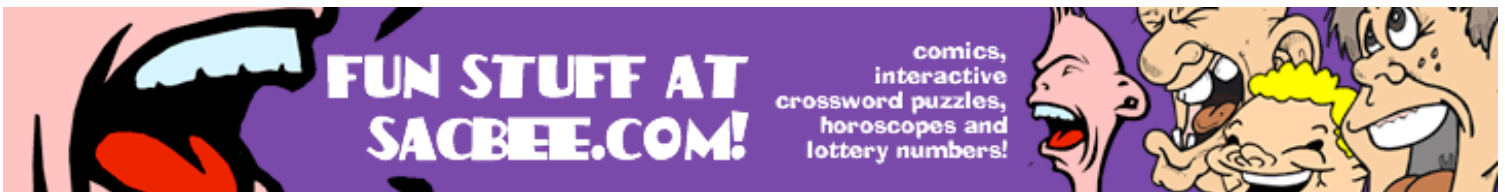


Douglas Zugnoni, 14, performs amaneuver during practice. Sacramento Bee/Anne Chadwick Williams

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