

Group promotes pride, arts for young Hispanics



Dennis Wall, Orlando Sentinel, Taryn Rutkovitz (2nd from right), a manager at the Engelwood Neighborhood Center, and Randolph Holloman (right), a recreation specialist, talk Friday with 13-year-olds Louis Adorno (from left), Derek Knott, Mathew Falu and Eric Knott about the Elevate Youth program.

Victor Manuel Ramos | Sentinel Staff Writer
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Christian Martir believes hip-hop saved him from the street life that sucked in his peers growing up in southeast Orlando.

Some were dropping out of school. Some were doing drugs. A few were going to jail. He was busy soaking up all he could about the music genre that became his passion.

Myrna Caban says a theater class, where she first learned about feminism, made the difference for her.

Both are worried, though, that too many teens in the largely Hispanic enclave around Semoran Boulevard where they grew up lack positive influences -- so they end up wasting time in the streets.

Martir and Caban, who co-host a weekly radio show for Hispanics on 91.5 FM (WPRK), are among a group of younger-than-usual activists trying to inspire children and teens in southeast Orlando.

They are co-founders of Batey Urbano, a new advocacy group in Orlando modeled after a namesake Chicago organization that promotes arts and political awareness among Puerto Ricans and other Hispanic youths. "Batey" was the name that the Taino natives of the

Caribbean gave to the gathering place for a ritual ballgame that brought their communities together.

The Orlando group is about to gather together 30 students to participate in a new program at the Engelwood Neighborhood Center in southeast Orlando. The youths will meet with group members and guests twice a month over several months. The goal is to offer the students interests that will enrich their lives -- whether it's break dancing, painting or poetry.

The "Elevate Youth" program will consist of workshops and discussions on popular culture, politics and community for Hispanics ages 10 to 18.

Caban, who as a teen felt lost after her parents split up, said those are some of the "tools" that gave her purpose. At the time, she had been hanging out with others her age who accepted "a lot of negative gender roles" and had a limited outlook on life.

"How I came to get away from some of the negativity in my life was through music and theater," said Caban, 30, an English as a Second Language teacher at Valencia Community College.

There will be sessions by group members and volunteers on hip-hop and the painting of street murals. There will be a workshop on the Brazilian street dance and martial art known as Capoeira. And group members will speak to participants about the civil-rights movement as it relates to Hispanics.

"It's something they are not getting in the schools," said Martir, 27.

The issues those group members are trying to address are very real, say community members and law-enforcement officials. Teen pregnancy and gangs are hurting area youth, they say.

Sgt. Jose Velez, an officer with the neighborhood patrol unit of the Orlando Police Department, said that southeast Orlando has become a gang hot spot. Gangs engage in robberies and drug traffic through neighborhoods from east of South Conway Road to South Goldenrod Road, Velez said.

The department, Velez said, has identified at least 20 gangs in that stretch of Orlando.

"It isn't as serious a problem as we see up in Chicago, L.A. or New York," said Velez, "but it is serious. It's one of those things that, at least in Orlando, we have been lucky enough that at a minimum we keep a lid on it."

Taryn Rutkovitz, manager of the Engelwood Neighborhood Center, said she sees the partnership with Batey Urbano's initiative as an opportunity to enrich the center's offerings for the dozens of teens who congregate on its basketball courts and in its game rooms on most evenings.

"What they are trying to do," Rutkovitz said, "is expand their minds, so they can think more about the choices they make."

Victor Manuel Ramos can be reached at vramos@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-6186.