



County programs help Marin's fathers find right path

Jim Staats

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San Rafael resident Jorge Del Aguila says the simple joy of kicking a soccer ball with his son is something he truly appreciates these days.

Del Aguila only has a few days a week with his son, Hector, 6, from a previous marriage, but he said those precious hours - along with his responsibilities - came into focus from his involvement in a fatherhood support group through the nonprofit Canal Alliance.

"If I didn't participate in this group, I don't know what would be up for my life," said Del Aguila, a painter, who has been with the program five years. "This group has helped me learn about what is good and bad. I have a good relationship with my son and my new wife."

Del Aguila is among hundreds of Marin men who have benefited from various meetings, social events and life skill workshops as part of the Marin Fatherhood Alliance. This year the group of 10 county programs operated through the Marin Community Foundation is celebrating a decade of service.

Other participating organizations include the Bay Area Male Involvement Network of San Rafael, Marin Asian Advocacy Project of Community Action Marin, Marin City Fatherhood Program, Marin Housing Authority, Marin City Network and the Grassroots Leadership Network. The alliance also oversees Centerforce, a transitional support group in San Rafael for incarcerated men and their families, Center Point, a San Rafael-based drug and alcohol

treatment program, and it supports but does not fund the Marin County Division of Child Support Services.

"The first time you hold that baby in your hands, you get the feeling running through you of how important that is for the rest of your life," said Saul Godinez, who coordinates the Canal Alliance program. "We want society to be aware that fatherhood is not guys finding out how to be tougher. It's about how we can be more supportive, nurturing and engaged in the child's education."

Jose-Luis Arana, a foundation employee who serves as alliance coordinator, said the agency had been funding groups dealing with child-support and absentee father issues when statistics in 1999 showed "a lot of men were not only falling behind in payment for child support, but also completely separated from the family."

He said alliance services focus on financial family planning, job search and parenting skills "for men to take responsibility not only financially, but emotionally to spend more time with their kids."

Nationwide, fewer than one in five fathers who live in households with their families reported taking their children to and from activities on a daily basis, according to 2002 figures from the National Responsible Fatherhood Initiative of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The same report showed fewer than one in three fathers helped their children with homework or even checked in on them. Only one in four fathers read to their children on a daily basis, the report stated.

Godinez, a father of four who coordinates a monthly support group for more than a dozen Latino men in San Rafael's Canal area, said he was spurred by problems experienced by fathers of some of his children's friends.

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He praised training in communication, parenting and inter-personal development skills for helping men such as Del Aguila, who initially joined to address problems in his marriage.

Dick McKee, who works with the Marin Asian Advocacy program through Community Action Marin, has also helped a fatherhood program in Marin City.

"This isn't an issue peculiar to the low-income community," McKee said. "It certainly goes across all the different economic strata. There are plenty of well-to-do dads who bail."

McKee said though the alliance represents a lot of different communities, the goals are the same.

"We're trying to get fathers to provide role models that create healthier children emotionally and socially."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

To learn more about the Marin Fatherhood Alliance, call Jose-Luis Arana at 497-3134.

Contact Jim Staats via e-mail at jstaats@marinij.com

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