

By [Sara Hall](#) on February 19th, 2013

## Local Kids Help Renovate Youth Center



(left to right) NLYM vice president of philanthropy Vicki Wadman, SOY arts and music director Eddie Iniestra, SOY operations manager Silvia Rosales, SOY board member Jean Forbath, NLYM president Camille Strader, and SOY board member Fred Macias. — Photos by Sara Hall

Two groups came together over the weekend with one common goal: Remodel and revitalize a youth center that helps at-risk teens in the community.

The National League of Young Men, a Newport Beach-based service organization for young men and their mothers, helped another non-profit group, Save Our Youth, clean, paint, and upgrade their facilities in Costa Mesa on Saturday. New carpet and furniture was also donated.

“The remodeling was very much needed,” said Operations Manager of SOY, Silvia Rosales. “And it was definitely not in our budget.”

“They’re like angels,” she added. “It’s such a blessing for us to have met them.”

Vice President of Philanthropy for NLYM, Vicki Wadman, connected with Rosales and got the project rolling as a parent and son service event for the organization. About 50 to 60 parents and their sons helped out on Saturday.



National League of Young Men members Chase Braun (right) and Jack McKasson, both 14 and students at Newport Harbor High School, fix up an old door for the SOY center.

“You’re definitely affected by your surroundings,” said the arts and music program director of SOY, Eduardo “Eddie” Iniestra. “Being comfortable and feeling good about where you’re at [can make a difference]. And our office badly needed a makeover, it was way overdue.”

Rosales and Iniestra gave a presentation at NLYM’s last mother meeting, said Camille Strader, president of the league, and the mothers passed around an envelope for donations, collecting enough to pay for all of the supplies needed for the remodel. Through the group’s connections they got the carpet and furniture donated by Alden’s Carpet and Draperies in Costa Mesa and Mike Manser of Corporate Office Interiors in Tustin.

Save Our Youth is an after school community organization that provides “a little bit of everything,” Rosales explained.

They provide a safe space for students to spend time, “keep busy and stay out of trouble,” she said.

The center includes an academic program, with tutoring and college tours at campuses across the state, and multiple art, music, dance, sports, health, fitness, and other programs.

“Basically, our whole goal is to provide an avenue and an outlet for the youth to be constructive and creative,” Iniestra said.

The main goal is to get the kids to graduate high school and then hopefully go on to college, he added.

SOY alumni often act as tour guides when the group visit a college that a SOY graduate attends.



[Andrea Ortega, 13, paints the SOY office on Saturday. Ortega, a student at TeWinkle Middle School, likes the dance program at SOY.](#)

“They get to go and they get to see someone who has actually been through the program and who grew up in their neighborhood that is able to do that [attend college],” Strader said.

“It’s a very empowering trip,” Rosales continued.

Rosales is looking for volunteer instructors and encourages them to teach whatever they’re passionate about, whether that be guitar or piano, art or dance, or academics or fitness.

About 300 kids are currently signed up for SOY, which is celebrating 20 years in the community this year.

SOY started after a shooting took place nearby in 1992 and a group of concerned community members got together to take action, said board member Jean Forbath. The gang violence was growing worse and SOY was founded in 1993 with the mission of preventing youth violence and to nurture the teens in the community to make positive decisions in life.

Angelica “Angel” Aragon went to SOY in the mid-1990s.

“It was a really nice place to get away,” from everything, said Aragon, who lived just down the street from the center. “Growing up, that was a really bad area.”

She would often hang out there after school, it's a great place to help stay out of trouble or stop "trouble (from) finding you."

There was a lot of gang members and violence in the area at the time, Aragon said.

"They made it feel safe," she recalled. And there was always somebody to talk to, the kids and the adults become a close knit group, she added.



One of the many student paintings on the walls at SOY.

Aragon can still picture all the details of what the center looked like and how it felt to be there. Saturday was the first time she had been back since graduating from the program.

"I remember it being bigger," she said with a laugh.

"I didn't even know this place was still here," she continued. "It's just incredible."

She worked on academics, fitness and boxing at SOY.

"The boxing was to help us get out of gangs and to defend ourselves... and teach us discipline... and it helped us in school," Aragon explained.

Iniestra is also a graduate of the program, he attended in the late 1990s.

"I felt really welcomed here," he said.

He later came back to help to volunteer as a DJ and as his role grew he started to develop the arts and music program. He quickly got excited about the idea of starting the program, giving kids opportunities that he didn't have growing up.

The arts helps establish self-confidence, individuality, and inspiration, he said.

Iniestra has also been a member of the Costa Mesa Cultural Arts Committee since 2010, where he been working toward bringing back art with local youth through various programs and events, including the upcoming Arts in the Park event in Estancia Park on May 11.

Frank Alvarez, 18, currently a student at Irvine Valley College, started coming to SOY when he was a student at TeWinkle middle school. The whole staff is very supportive, said Alvarez, peers and alumni also helped create a support network, he added. Alvarez participated in a variety of the programs that SOY offers, including the matching funds scholarship program, which is no longer available due to lack of funds.

The donor for that program also funded many other aspects of the organization, Rosales explained, and since then it's been hard to stay afloat and they have had to make budget cuts.

Ivis Torres went though the program, was hired on staff to run the girls program, and then let go last year.

The threat of the SOY center closing down was a real worry, she said.

“They gave me a chance, now what about the other kids that still need that chance?” asked Torres, who now works with SOY on a volunteer basis.



Connor Chung, 15, Sage Hill School student, paints an office wall at SOY. He came with his dad, Henry, for the parent/son NLYM activity.

“We’re going on bare skeleton funds to run the center,” Rosales said.

Rosales and Iniestra, and Torres when she worked there, take on many roles, especially since they’ve lost funds.

So volunteers like the young men and parents from NLYM are much needed, Rosales said.

“The fact that people come out and are willing to help, is amazing,” Torres said. “It means a lot.”

“They [the National League of Young Men] are giving us, the kids, a fresh start,” she added.

“The young men enjoy it,” Strader said. They get to stay busy and do something physical. “It’s the perfect match for us.”

Many of the moms have already asked about helping with other projects for SOY or volunteering for the center, Strader said.

“It’s the perfect start to a great relationship,” she added.

“We’re very grateful that we got to meet them and that they’re helping out so much,” Rosales said about the NLYM group. “It’s an amazing feeling to know that there are people out there that care and are willing to go an extra mile to help someone who really needs it. It’s really amazing, I can’t thank them enough.”

The Save Our Youth program is still definitely needed in the community, Aragon said.

“My experience here at SOY has been very eye-opening,” Alvarez said, who still returns for advice and to volunteer.

They were that extra support that guided him and helped him apply to college and realize his full potential.

“It inspired me to go beyond getting the [high school] diploma and continue onto my college career and make something out of my life,” Alvarez said. “They inspired me to be a better person.”

*For more information about NLYM, visit [nationalleagueofyoungmen.org](http://nationalleagueofyoungmen.org).*

*For more information about SOY, visit [save-our-youth.org](http://save-our-youth.org).*