

DAILY PILOT

High-schoolers step up to help

About 30 fourth-graders at Pomona Elementary receive school supplies, lesson aid and encouragement.



(KEVIN CHANG, Daily Pilot / November 30, 2012)

Members of the National League of Young Men deliver donated school supplies during a visit to Pomona Elementary's after school program, Project Success, on Friday.

By Jeremiah Dobruck

December 1, 2012

About 30 high school students got a pep talk in the rain at Pomona Elementary School Friday.

"It's a little awkward at first, but by the end, they won't want you to leave," Jamie Kula, a parent organizer with the Newport-Mesa chapter of the National League of Young Men, told the students about the project they were about to undertake.

That project involved meeting about 30 fourth-graders.

"We have some visitors for you guys," aide Cynthia Cruz told the fourth-graders. "They have some cool stuff for you, and they want to hang out and get to know you. So make sure you're not being shy."

With that, the high schoolers wheeled in a cart full of school supplies.

"Lauriano, what color school box do you want?" asked Clay Smyth, a senior at Newport Harbor High School.

He quickly returned with the dark-blue container requested and started helping with a worksheet that Lauriano Aguilar was blazing through.

"Geeze, you did that quick," Smyth said. "You're a smart kid."

Smyth and his peers, mostly from Newport Harbor High School, were at Pomona in Costa Mesa to be individual tutors. That sat with kids for about half an hour each and distributed school supplies.

Project Success, a districtwide after-school program for low-income students, had told them where its greatest need was.

Cruz said Project Success has shifted this year to include more students who need academic help, but it still focuses on a core of homework help and literacy.

This is the second year the Newport Mesa NLYM has volunteered with the program.

In 2011, when they were known as the Beach City Service League, members donated 120 boxes of crayons, pencils, scissors and more to Whittier Elementary School. This year, members distributed 260 boxes to Pomona and Wilson Elementary School.

The supplies are needed, said Brianna Lopez, an aide with Project Success. Because the program leans on grant funding, sometimes supplies dwindle and end up being bought out-of-pocket, she said.

But while providing the supplies is important, NYLM and Project Success also value the one-on-one interaction between students.

"It serves as a bit of an outlet for them," Lopez said. "I think it helps them open up more."

The donation program began about four years and then evolved to work locally.

"It started out as just trying to do something simple for kids in our backyard," said Susan Friend, whose sons brainstormed the idea.

At Newport Harbor, they started a club called Orlando's Outreach, named for the boys' contact in Costa Rica, where the supplies were sent.

They quickly adapted to the Newport-Mesa Unified School District instead and joined forces with a nonprofit, NLYM.

This year the young men invited their female counterparts along.

"We're trying to make giving fun," Friend added.

When it was time for the high school students to depart, the fourth graders let out a collective groan of disappointment.

And as he was saying goodbye with a high-five, Lauriano summed up his temporary tutor with one word: "good."

Smyth went a few words further. "It was really awesome," he said.