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Youth plan mural, exercise spirit of service, leadership

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LEXINGTON—Nuestro Futuro kids attended a conference in Lincoln recently, hosted by the United States Department of Agriculture Rural Youth Development project entitled: Engaging Youth, Serving Communities (EYSC), administrated through the University of Nebraska at Lincoln Extension Office.

Among other things, the Minutemen and Minutemaids of LHS's Nuestro Futuro Youth Leadership group say they liked the idea of painting a mural as a community building service project.

Jorge Martinez, a freshman at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, and president of Nuestro Futuro, led the meeting, breezing through some items, but spending ample time with the mural project idea. "I talked to Juan at El Tropico," Martinez said, "as long as it looks good, he said we can paint whatever we want."

The site they proactively secured on the east side of the El Tropico building, is partially visible from the viaduct when descending into the downtown area from Highway 283.

With that kind of creative freedom, the kids "went to town" on brainstorming visual ideas for the ample two-story currently red-brick canvas.

According to Martinez, the owner thinks almost anything will be an improvement over the existing paint job.

They throw out a few names that sound like "Ismael" and "Waldo," presumably referring



A laid-back, productive, and fun Nuestro Futuro meeting where kids briefly stifle their almost constant laughter for a group photo. Clockwise from left, Sergio Ceja (10), Zulema Reyes (10), Paulina Villa (10), Rocio Pastor(11), Danny Penaflor (10), Diana Alvarez (10), Yohana Lopez (9), Jorge L. Martinez (UNK freshman), Jose Jimenez (12), Lorena Ortega (12), Everlyn Gonzalez (11), Frances Peterson (sponsor), Yobana Ramirez (9), and Mayra Tavarez (9).

to local individuals with freehand drawing talent, as possible designers.

The meetings are lively. The kids seem happy to be there. Everyone attends by choice.

The youth, mostly high school kids, discussed visual themes that represent Lexington.

“A big L,” someone suggests. “Different cultures!” another exclaims. “Brown people!” someone shouts, at which point the room burst into laughter.

Other suggestions were images depicting different typical activities like cookouts, dancing, sports, etc.

Danny Penaflor, one of NF’s secretaries, along with Sergio Ceja, took notes on a laptop.

Lorena Ortega, a senior, NF’s treasurer, and one of the more vocal group participants, became involved with NF because her older sister was involved in previous years when she attended LHS.

Rocio Pastor serves as the group’s vice president, and brings an organized and rational balance to discussions.

Among other agenda items were Plum Creek Days, Fourth of July Celebration ideas, and other ongoing projects like the Hispanic Heritage Festival they produce yearly.

Susan Bennett of the Lexington Area Chamber of Commerce invited them to host a teen dance as part of Plum Creek Days, on June 10.

They believe they will use the St. Ann’s Parish Center building for the dance, and host it as an inside-outside event, depending on the weather.

A great deal of excitement ensued when the kids understood that Plum Creek Days had a Wild West theme, and soon everyone was chatting about what to wear.

At first, they joked about wearing toy guns in their holsters, a throwback to Spaghetti Westerns, and then it was decided guns would not be encouraged, to avoid confusion about NF’s mission.

It was decided through comedic antics and saucy hand gestures that they would instead shoot photos and texts across the dancefloor, carrying cellphones and pdas instead of anything resembling an old-school weapon.

If NF’s mission has any anti-violence component, it may be that this group began as a place where youth could step up to take on leadership roles. Today, youth still see this as an alternative to destructive behaviors like excessive partying and any gang-related activities.

Though some kids did open up about gang experiences they'd witnessed, this never became the focus of the meeting. They are happy to be creating productive community-service oriented projects, and in fact were a group instrumental in cleaning up graffiti from various public and private sites with the help of city employee Bill Brecks.

Often, NF creates activities, temporarily filling what they refer to as Lexington's missing link, that is, pastimes and venues for youth recreation outside of school activities.

During the 4th of July, they hope to produce a small street carnival.

"If you're super, super sweet to me," says Adult Sponsor and leader Frances Peterson, "I might give up my 4th of July again."

"Please!" everyone responded with exuberance.

They would like to create games and booths, possibly organize a parade, and as kids continued to playfully call out ideas, Martinez, a goofy character, had everyone laughing the whole time.

"A-hem, ex-cu-use me" Ortega chimed in, "You're the president, please act accordingly," she retorted with a smug smile.

"Where can we get the hay?" someone else yelled out, referring to float ideas for the parade, to which everyone replied, "It's Nebraska! You can get it everywhere!"

Ortega and Jose Jimenez, seniors, along with Everlyn Gonzalez, a junior, then officially formed the float committee.

In addition to the fun youth activities, the group also discussed something that involves senior citizens. They plan to see if residents from Park Avenue Estates would like to play shuffle board or bowl with them.

Someone else suggested teaching them the Spanish game of "Loteria," a cousin of Bingo.

As kids listened, Peterson doled out contact numbers for them to use for following-up on various initiatives.

Nuestro Futuro kids are happy to be back on the map. A "leadership vacuum" ensued briefly after their past president, and organizer of the Miss Voz Latina Pageant, Luis Sotelo, went away to college in Illinois last year.

For several months, the group lapsed in their meetings, and had not chosen new leaders.

"That's when Jorge and Lorena stepped up and made new leadership happen," Peterson said.

They discussed a T-shirt design for the group, which requires a motto and logo they're also working on, to help represent their renewed sense of group identity.

They know that activities they do to help enrich the Lexington community now and make it a good place for youth will pay off in many ways.

Jimenez says he had a sibling who was into drinking, and for awhile, looked toward this kind of behavior as something he would welcome in adolescence, but then realized there were other outlets for his energy.

Now, he says he could have graduated last semester because of his credit load, but chose to stay in because his new goal is achieving a spot on the "top 10" list for student grade point averages. Right now he's at number 11.

Most Nuestro Futuro members have gone to college and several have come back to serve the group either intermittently or regularly as adult leaders.

The group is open to all, however, most if not all current members are Latino or Hispanic and to this end, more than one member said they wanted to change local public perception of "Hispanic Youth" away from any "gangbanger" connotation and toward that of the productive community-member.

Among their dreams and current aspirations: pediatrics, government, athletic training, professional athletics, medical examining, detective, broadcast journalism, photography, as well as traveling the world, performing comedy, and others said they looked forward to being parents someday.

Danny Penaflor then added a rather touching comment. "I want to be a dad that doesn't worry about money."

"Being wealthy and being rich are different," added Martinez. For him the distinction comes down to the way he feels. He can feel rich in his relationships without billions of dollars.

Just throw out a question into the Nuestro Futuro crowd, and a lively philosophical and anecdotal conversation will sprout.

Together the group discussed their views on human attitudes in general, the nature of positive and negative forces in the world, and the idea of problem-solving on all levels versus acceptance, and what defines positive change.

"Some people can try and tackle all problems, but you can't solve everything," Ortega said.

"But you need those kind of people too," Jimenez said.

“Yeah but those people go crazy,” Ortega followed.

Pastor chimed in her balanced view, “Sometimes you just need to accept.

“People have to be the change they want to see, you can’t just stand there.”

“If you want to see change,” agreed Martinez, “you have to change yourself.”

What do these kids think Lexington needs?

A place for teens to hang out, more places to go where they can stay out of trouble. They cited the Big Apple, and also the YMCA as attractive possibilities.

Keyli Aldana, says that diversity in Lexington should be preserved. “It’s known for its diversity. We should keep that.”

Jimenez feels education in general here is most important to the town’s future. He was surprised to see he had some of the highest academic scores of other incoming freshman he will soon meet when he goes to Hastings College next fall. “There were kids coming from Denver, other places in Colorado, and I was one of the highest achievers.”

The NFers also jumped on questions about the role of education in success and happiness in life.

The general consensus showed that while formal education was generally positive, an educated person is not the end all, be all and can not guarantee the heart of an inherently good-natured person.

He said he would like to be rich in order to distribute wealth by making work opportunities available to others.

They then discussed Bill Gates’ success and philanthropy. Though he never completed college, he has helped make higher education possible for many youth.

Zulema Reyes’ older sister, Sandra, was the recipient of a Gates’ scholarship which has allowed her nearly a full-ride through college, as well as scholarship-sponsored trips to cities like New York where she has ultimately gained positive exposure and great experiences.

“They are a really good group,” Peterson said as the meeting wound down. “I just passed my first year anniversary with them, and they still like me. I’m honored to be a part of it.”

The focus moved toward more practical matters like the Hispanic Heritage Festival, where they discussed an eating contest, and a picture booth where Everlyn Gonzalez, who wants

to be a photographer, will likely practice her skills.

After the meeting was over, two stragglers, Ortega and Jimenez briefly consulted over calculus II challenges, working toward understanding some problem sets.

The next Nuestro Futuro will take place May 20 and will involve free Pizza. All wishing to participate are invited.

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