

Nuestro Lugar/Our Place's name reflects a commitment to welcome youth whose first language is Spanish.



support. Rafferty is excited that LEAD has almost met a \$20,000 fundraising challenge; an anonymous donor promised \$20,000 if the organization could raise that much in matching donations by Jan. 31. By the end of last week, LEAD was about \$2,000 away from its goal and at press time, an source who prefers to remain anonymous told the *Weekly* that the source would send a check to make up any gaps left by the end of the month.

Sampedro, one of the busiest but most organized teens in the city, is looking toward the long-term future. She's happy about the programs that Nuestro Lugar will be able to offer to teens, from computer labs and tutoring to dance lessons, self-defense classes and the opportunity to develop leadership skills. "I'm really happy that resources will be more equally distributed between the rich and the poor," she says, noting that low-income teens rarely get the opportunity to take extra classes. Brown's also happy about it because he sees the tragedy of letting low-income and at-risk teens fall through the cracks. "If you don't pay attention to them, they get thrown out with the trash," he says, and he thinks they deserve better. But Sampedro has a vision of more teen centers, spread across the county, within ten years.

One of the ways Nuestro Lugar helps low-income, multicultural or at-risk youth strive for and accomplish more is the three agreements. Those agreements, central to LEAD philosophy, were also adopted by the teen center committee. First is for anyone taking part in the center to stay in school or, if they're not in a conventional school, to be actively working towards a GED. Second is to obey the law — not to drink, do drugs, join a gang or otherwise get into

trouble. Because both LEAD and Nuestro Lugar believe in social justice, however, there are exceptions for those arrested during civil disobedience actions and those who are in the country without documentation. But the third agreement goes beyond a rule to help the youth reach for their dreams. It's the "life assignment" piece, in which teens define and actively work on reachable goals in their lives.

Williams says that when she joined LEAD at 16, the agreements helped her focus on her schoolwork, stop drinking and gain confidence in her speaking abilities. And when, early on in her LEAD time, one of her friends died in a car accident, her LEAD group and Rafferty supported her and let her deal with her grief. "I remember that so clearly," she says. "I took up an hour of LEAD's time, and people genuinely cared." Her life assignments right now include being the first person in her family to finish college and, as a LEAD volunteer, being an adult advocate for the LGBTQ community. "It feels really good to have the teen center, to give a safe environment for teens," she says.

Other LEAD teens note the value of the life assignments. "I was going through life school portion by school portion," says 14-year-old Ben Ennis, a freshman at the Network Charter School, until his mom found LEAD for him. "It was totally open, everybody greeted me warmly." Now Ben, whose life assignment is "to learn everything and anything I can about computers and spread that knowledge around," has set up Nuestro Lugar's computer lab and plans on replacing the office computers. And, D Cohen notes, Sacred Heart Medical Center donated many computers to LEAD. With Ben's help, Nuestro Lugar intends to provide rehabilitated computers for the teens to use at home.

Ben's counterpart on the environmental front is Will Ross, a 17-year-old who attends the Center for Appropriate Transport and is one of two teens from LEAD to take part in the super-tough National Outdoor Leadership School. Will serves as an intern for LEAD during the second half of the school day, and his life assignment, he says, is "to reduce air pollution through the use of bikes rather than cars." He's agonized by the fact that people can't fix their own bikes because they don't have the knowledge or tools, and that low-income teens can't spend money on that kind of work either. "I want to build and repair bikes for cheap or maybe free, so I can eliminate all the excuses

people have," he says. A big part of LEAD's adventure portion, monthly outdoor excursions plus a five-day rafting trip at the end of the year, consists of environmental awareness, and Will is all for it. He took part last year in LEAD's Plant-a-Thon, which will happen on a grander scale this year (the group has 10,000 trees to plant, with the help of McKenzie River Trust and countless volunteers). An unfinished mural on the wall shows off each component of LEAD, and the "adventure" portion is clearly going to be a celebration of the rafting trip. "I'm too poor for a week-long rafting trip" without LEAD, says Jenna McSween, a 15-year-old sophomore at Wellsprings Friends School who is working hard on the mural. Jenna says she's been drawing "since I could pick up a crayon," and as a creative person, her life assignment is to create a magazine for teenagers and publish what teens want to say.

And teens don't only want to express themselves in English. Nuestro Lugar's bilingual name reflects a commitment on the part of LEAD and teen center staff to welcome youth whose first language is Spanish. But former co-coordinators Itahi Diaz and Itziri Moreno got busy with school, and Juventud FACETA, whose members range in age up to 24, found a home of its own earlier this year with Amigos Multicultural Services at the old Whiteaker Elementary School. That means the center isn't quite as bilingual as the three partner groups originally planned. That doesn't mean LEAD or Nuestro Lugar have given up, though; the Wednesday night LEAD group is bilingual in Spanish and English, and many of the youth and staff members either speak both languages or are working on improving in a second language.

Co-coordinator Elizabeth Sampedro can't wait to see the effect of Nuestro Lugar spreading throughout the community. "Our main goal is to provide a place that's supportive, fun and safe, where teens can be themselves, grow in leadership skills and stay away from risk factors like school dropout, being in gangs or engaging in risky sex." She knows the three agreements will help with that goal, and she also knows how valuable it is to have the space. She adds, "After so many times of us meeting in little offices or places that weren't really ours, to say this is ours, we are welcome here, we have the resources we need to keep our education going and get the help that we need that won't cost us anything, that's a really important thing." **ew**

For more information on hours, donating or volunteering for LEAD or Nuestro Lugar, visit www.leadteen.com or call 342-8336.



LEAD encourages outdoor skills like rock-climbing, rafting and snowshoeing.