

Merced County Youth Opportunity Program

By Margie Cotta

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Pictured here from left to right (kneeling) Sam Chavez, Juan Cabrera. Middle row Sandy Lemas, Yesenia Exquivez, Bernadette Castaneda, Teresa Jimenez, Guadalupe (Sable) Martinez, Maira Cavajal, Brenda Cardoza, Ermi Leon, Linda Mendez, Yolanda Ponce and Margie Cotta. Back row Lacey Vandermack, Cathy Rivera, Lorraine Flores, Penny Baker, Renee Cobian, Mari Benetti, Anna Villalta, Adrian Estorga and Roy Lower.

What's up with our youth today? Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, substantial changes have been made regarding the services of disadvantaged youth. We have shifted from a summer to a year round program. It is the goal of Merced County Youth Opportunity Program (YOP) program to assist each participant with obtaining basic skills and academics; work readiness; and vocational skills. This program also assists with mentoring students and helping them to achieve a vocational certificate; high school diploma or equivalent; obtain suitable employment or enter an apprenticeship; go into the military or enroll in post secondary education.

Some services provided are: study skill training and instruction; tutoring; paid/unpaid work-experience; mentoring; leadership development; supportive services; alternative secondary school service; guidance and counseling; labor market information and job opportunities.

Who's eligible for services? Youth who are between the ages of 14 to 18 year old, in school, and meet the income and other eligibility requirements. These young people have met the requirements and have been enrolled into the program. This summer they were employed by Merced County Office of Education to gain work experience. The students, as well as many local businesses benefit from the program. Students from our community gain World to Work skills while the employer invested in the futures of our youth. Participating businesses in the community were: Food 4 Less, Kmart, Fashion Bug, Copy Shipping Solutions, Kragen's, City of Los Banos Public Works, Mike's Main Street Market, Wal-Mart, and Worknet of Merced County.

Of the 36 students from this community who participated by working this summer, 13 were hired, 6 are pending employment, and 5 have the possibility of working during Christmas holiday. To celebrate this achievement and success of the program for our youth, the students, ROP Instructor, support staff, and Department of Workforce Investment staff conducted a YOP End of The Year Presentation and Celebration in order to thank the employers for investing their time and skills. The students shared the skills they learned in their ROP classroom, instructed by Margie Cotta and job related skills that were mentored by business staff from the community.