A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Cops, kids working to make a once-troubled Mount Vernon neighborhood livable

Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

le la Luz, 11, reads an essay she wrote about why she likes Mount Vernon's Kulshan Creek neighborhood as Mount Vernon Police Officer ondale watches. Gerondale is the neighborhood resource officer for Kulshan Creek, a largely Latino neighborhood in east Mount Vernon.

Federal, public programs spur Kulshan Creek renewal

"When I used to come through here ... I didn't feel very safe. It's changed a lot."

AmeriCorps volunteer Linda De la Rosa

By LEVI PULKKINEN
Staff Writer

MOUNT VERNON — Standing before an audience that included children from her neighborhood, parents, friends and Skagit County leaders, Maria De la Luz softly read her essay aloud in her native Spanish.

As she spoke, Kulshan Creek Neighborhood Station program director Teresa Reynoza translated the girl's thoughts on her home for non-Spanish speaking audience members, a minority at the station that damp day last week.

The 11-year-old De la Luz recounted a litany of joys she finds in her neighborhood, Kulshan Creek. She listed her friends, many of whom were present and helping with the "niños and niñas" (younger children) around the predominantly Latino east Mount Vernon neighborhood.

Also on her list was the neighborhood station, a school district portable known by frequent visitors as the Casa Azul, or blue house, and the Mount Vernon police officer who can often be found there, Jon Gerondale.

De la Luz, a Madison Elementary School student, said she met Gerondale soon after she moved into one of the large apartment buildings in the neighborhood a year ago. Since then, she and the officer have planted tomatoes together in a community garden next to the blue house. .

"She lives very happy around here," Reynoza said, translating for De la Luz. "She likes it because it's very (peaceful) around here. ... She feels protected by her friend Jon Gerondale."

Many who have long-standing ties to the neighborhood, including some former residents, say De la Luz and other children wouldn't have felt as secure in Kulshan Creek a decade ago. The neighborhood had a history of higher rates of violent crime.

But that's changed, in part because of children such as De la Luz who have been instrumental in cleaning up the neighborhood, said Gerondale.

Programs sponsored by governments and private donors — like the essay-writing contest De la Luz won last Thursday — are helping to make Kulshan Creek a better home for Mount Vernon families, he added. Young De la Luz was the first-place winner among 25 children who entered their essays in the contest.

'It's changed'

AmeriCorps volunteer Linda De la

See KULSHAN, Page A6

Kulshan: Community pushed for more social services

Continued from Page A1

Rosa spent her childhood just up the Kulshan Creek trail from the neighborhood station, where the 18-year-old now serves as an after-school tutor for neighborhood kids.

De la Rosa said she used to walk through the Kulshan Creek neighborhood heading to LaVenture Middle School. Just six years ago, it was a somewhat frightening place, she said.

"When I used to come through here ... I didn't feel very safe," De la Rosa said. "It's changed a lot."

Part of the credit for those changes goes to community members who pushed for more social services for the area, said Nancy Brown, Skagit County director of youth and family services.

The decade-old effort to improve Kulshan Creek was launched by women working to prevent domestic violence who operated out of the trunks of their cars, Brown said. Since then, the county, the city of Mount Vernon and the school district have launched coordinated initiatives to make the neighborhood more livable, usually using federal and state grant money to pay the bills.

"The (children) now have a real strong sense that they belong here," Brown said. "We come here to say 'Your neighborhood is this important.'"

Reynoza said the programs operated out of the neighborhood station — after-school tutoring, parenting classes, domestic violence intervention — are improving the lives of those who live near the blue house.

The center regularly receives letters from teachers commenting on the improvements students are making, Reynoza said. And thanks in large part to the volunteer labor of the children, residents are beginning to take more pride in Kulshan Creek.

Like Reynoza, Gerondale's presence at Kulshan Creek is due to those efforts, Brown said. And like Reynoza — who commands a level of obedience from the children at the station many teachers would envy — Gerondale has been a hit with the kids, Brown said.

"He looks like the pied piper walking down the street with all the kids streaming after him," Brown said.

Gerondale, a 6 1/2-year police department veteran with two years as Kulshan Creek's resource officer, said he's seen a decrease in violent crimes in the neighborhood in recent years.

The department is fielding more of what Gerondale called "quality-of-life calls" — mostly noise complaints and calls about late-night gatherings. But he said that increase is occurring because residents now feel more comfortable calling the police than they had in years past.

As to his newfound celebrity among the children, Gerondale could only joke.

"It's pretty cool," he said. "It can be tough though, when you pull into a parking lot, and five kids come up to you trying to hug you."

Future leaders

All 25 entrants in the station's essay writing contest received a $5 gift certificate donated by the Mount Vernon State Farm insurance office, with larger prizes going to De la Luz and the second- and third-place finishers — Raul Castro, 12, and Bernabe Baltazar, 11.

The bashful winners were also rewarded with a little public adoration Thursday. After reading their essays, they were thanked by County Commissioner Ken Dahlstedt, who was on hand for the pizza party.

Calling the neighborhood station "another county-city partnership that's working," Dahlstedt said he believes the programs there show the children "that they're part of the overall community."

"The kids need to know that they're really important to us," he said. "I mean, these are our future leaders here."

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