



Perspective

SteppingUP for the future

Hard times have forced this Santa Ana nonprofit to cut back on the students it helps.

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First, the good news.

At 18, Ava Morelos is the oldest of five siblings from a working-class family in Santa Ana. Her father is a gardener; her mother is a homemaker. No one in her family has gone to college. But this month, Ava will don a cap and gown, and graduate from Santiago High School in Garden Grove with a 3.92 grade point average. She has been accepted to several UC and Cal State schools and will start her studies at Cal State Long Beach. Her goal is to become a special-education teacher.

Morelos is part of a nonprofit college-prep program called SteppingUP, which matches at-risk teens throughout Orange County with students from local universities.

“It’s good to have someone helping you with your grades and checking up on you and getting you the help that you need,” says Ava, adding that she also attends workshops on time management, stress relief and personal budgeting. (Parents also have a chance to learn budgeting, and homeownership, credit repair, citizenship, education and job training, among other subjects.)

After four years, 100 percent of the scores of students who have graduated from the SteppingUP program have attended college. These children come from across the county – from Dana Point to Buena Park. The Orange County Community Housing Corp. (chsup.com), a nonprofit that owns 225 low-income housing units where the students live – launched SteppingUP in 2006, when its officials realized that just giving shelter to families in need wasn’t enough to break the cycle of poverty.

“If we are trying to do something to change things, we had to do more to help people,” says Allen Peters Baldwin, the nonprofit’s executive director.

Six college students are paid \$15 an hour to mentor 20 students, a job that requires about 18 hours a week. Baldwin says his goal is to create a “perpetual motion machine,” so that

SteppingUP students who attend local colleges return to the community to help the next crop of kids.

The program also operates Tutor Houses, where students can go to study, and gives tours of college campuses throughout Southern California.

Now, the bad news.

SteppingUP, a lean operation, is funded mostly through private donations and operating profits from the Orange County Community Housing Corp. It has been hit hard by the recession. This year, SteppingUP is making due with less than half of the \$350,000 in donations it received in 2007.

Accordingly, the students in the program have dropped from 130 to about 75.

This is especially maddening, given that SteppingUP is ready to expand to students in the seventh and eighth grades, which would give low-income children an even greater chance at success.

The bad news can be only temporary. SteppingUP is now raising funds for next year. You or your business could help in two ways: First, make a tax-deductible contribution to the nonprofit, which is a direct investment in tomorrow's work force. Or second, you can sponsor or buy a table – or just a couple of tickets – for its annual fundraiser on Sept. 16.

What would happen to Orange County if every at-risk student were assigned an inspiring academic mentor? It's a tantalizing dream, isn't it?