



Area Youth Band Together, Speak Out Against Exit Exam

By Shereen Oca

Aug. 12, 2009--While some teens opt for more leisurely activities during the summer, 17-year-old Kenyon Davis and 16-year-old Jolene Rodriguez spent the past six weeks campaigning for a higher quality of education by fundraising, canvassing and phone banking the residents of Long Beach.

Davis and Rodriguez were among the 10 high school students who took part in the Summer Youth Leadership Academy conducted by Californians for Justice (CFJ).

As part of the program, the high schoolers learned about the history of public education and gender justice, among other topics, in addition to taking field trips to the Long Beach Unified School District Truancy Counseling Center, the Teachers Association of Long Beach and Planned Parenthood.

Rodriguez, who was recruited into the program at Cabrillo High School, said one of the things she learned this summer was how to speak up and share her opinion.

"I learned that even though there is racism wherever you go, I can stop it," she said. "I don't have to be afraid. If I have a voice and something to say, I should stop it. I don't want racism to affect younger generations or even my peers."

The students' efforts reached a pinnacle last Thursday as they hosted a forum at the Cesar Chavez Park, dubbed "Lockdown CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam)." There they spoke out about the inequities the exit exam generates, advocating that the requirement reduces graduation rates among girls and students of color.

Davis, a high school senior, said he joined the leadership program because he felt his voice wasn't being heard at Poly High.

"I was in a CAHSEE class and I actually had to share a textbook," he said. "When you're in a class to prepare you for the test and still there's not enough textbooks provided, that means there is shortage or lack of resources. And I felt like if you need to give us a test, then you need to prepare us 100%."

Davis said he plans to use the skills he acquired to run a club called Next STEP (Student Teaching Empowerment Program) at Poly next year, fulfilling an objective of the CFJ summer program, which is to motivate students to become future leaders at their schools.

"I think that there has been a tremendous amount of growth that has happened throughout the program," said Samantha Knox, a Long Beach organizer for the CFA. "A lot of folks have stepped out of their shells and became a little more empowered and encouraged to speak to strangers and community members."

CFJ is a grassroots organization that strives for the racial justice of youth, immigrants, low-income people and communities of color. For details, visit www.caljustice.org.