

CYO program brightens future for Hispanic youths

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — When Yesenia Ramos' friends at Wilson Magnet High School recently took their Standardized Achievement Tests, they moaned and groaned over the difficult questions on the exams.

"All the people complained they (the SATs) were really hard, but I got through them," said Ramos, 16, a junior at Wilson High.

The Mt. Carmel parishioner credits her self-confidence to her instructors and advisers in the Hispanic and Southwest Youth Employment Program, which is operated by the Catholic Youth Organization, a department of Catholic Family Center.

The program, which assists about 90 Hispanic city residents per year between the ages of 15-20, targets youth who have had difficulty in school or run-ins with the law. Potential participants are recruited through the city's Catholic and public high schools.

In each of its last two years, the program has also set its sights on about 20 "at risk" teenagers on the city's southwest side, according to Debbie Cummings-Brown, program director.

According to Brown, about 88 percent of the high school participants are declared "academically improved" in their studies by the time they leave the program, and 70 percent are placed in full- or part-time jobs.

Each of the program's participants must be enrolled in high school within 30 days of admittance to the program. Students take an assessment test and are then tutored in math and/or English for two hours, three days a week. They must also attend a series



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
As a clerk with Visiting Nurse Services, Yesenia Ramos applies job skills she learned through the Hispanic and Southwest Youth Employment Program.

of "job readiness" training workshops designed to help them find and keep a job.

Classes in English as a second language are also available to students who primarily speak Spanish.

Each student receives an individually tailored academic program, and the counselors also offer students information on such services as day care for single parents. Participants can also get public transportation assistance if needed.

Robin Hayes, the CYO's assessment coordinator, said that the employment program was started about six years ago after a United Way study found that Puerto Rican youth needed more employment and education help than the social service network made available.

Citing the fact that many Puerto Rican teenagers originally came from rural areas in the island commonwealth and don't learn English until they emigrate from their birthplace, Hayes said adjusting to the

English-speaking culture in New York can cause numerous problems for immigrants.

"There is a language barrier (in) school (that) adds, to an extent, a barrier to excellence academically," she said.

Young Hispanics must not only overcome the language barrier to gain employment, Hayes said, they must also conquer cultural attitudes.

"There's the (Puerto Rican) idea that women should not go out alone," she said. "A lot of parents don't feel a woman should come to the tutor alone."

Such attitudes, however, only point to the Puerto Rican parents' deep concern for their children's welfare — a concern which organizers of the program respect. Hayes noted that she keeps in continual letter and phone contact with the students' families, a practice which pays off in the trust bestowed on the organizers of the program, Brown said.

Not only do counselors teach students how to use the want ads and look for jobs with various companies, but they place them with such regular program employers as Visiting Nurse Service, Inc. — where Ramos works — and the Ibero-American Action League.

Employers who are willing to hire the program's "graduates" can be reimbursed 75 percent of the students' wages for up to six months, Brown said. Employers are then encouraged to keep the youngster on as a permanent employee.

Students themselves have a financial incentive to complete their tutoring and job readiness programs, Brown and Hayes said, noting that participants can make up to \$95 — paid in installments — for successfully completing both aspects of the program.

Ramos said that such financial rewards compelled her, in part, to join the employment program in the first place. Between her clerical job and the money she received for completing the tutoring and job readiness workshops, Ramos was able to pay for tickets to take a boy from a different school to her junior prom.

Unfortunately, not all of the program's lessons sank in, Ramos admitted. "To this day, I owe money to my brother," she said.

DeSales High School

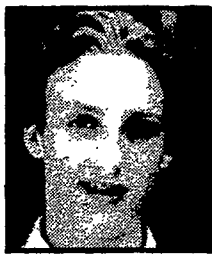
Does your town offer much to do?

MIKE VANSICKLE, freshman

Waterloo has several activities to offer the youth of the community. One of these is the Waterloo Recreation Center. Here one may participate in ping-pong, basketball, air hockey, foosball or just hang out and socialize with schoolmates.

Many local businesses sponsor softball teams for boys and girls. The schools, both private and public, have seasonal activities and dances aside from various sports.

Area churches support the youth in any way they possibly can, especially spiritually, which is the basis for all good moral judgment.



AS TEENS SEE IT

JEFF HARDY, junior

Personally, I do not believe the Geneva community offers much of anything for youth to do on weekends. There are no places to go to listen to music, dance, or just hang out and talk. I think that if an indoor recreation center would put on dances every weekend, the youth of the community could pay the cost just by the amount of participation that would be involved.



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