

In San Diego, One Prevention Program Goes the Distance Friday Night Live Mentors Use ALERT's Peer Teen Leader Component

By Lauren Matison

The last bell of the day rings, and the quiet courtyard at O'Farrell Community School becomes a buzzing square of blue and white uniformed students making plans for the night -- after homework is finished. But for one group of kids, the most anticipated part of their day is just beginning. Inside one room, a group of high school mentors huddle to confirm the next hour's agenda. Meanwhile, the 6th through 8th grade middle schoolers - *protégés* - snack. When everyone convenes in the center of the room, there is an immediate focus and readiness. One protégé whispers to another, "*what is the lesson this week?*" The camaraderie is infectious, even in silence, as youth development assistant and coordinator, Lawrence Ortiguerra, opens the session directing students not to listen to him, but to a mentor, Kristine Negado, the latest hire to the Friday Night Live mentoring administration.

The FRIDAY NIGHT LIVE (FNL) program was created in 1984 by the California Office of Traffic and Safety, after a group of kids were killed one Friday night in a drunk driving accident. The mentoring program was originally called "Stay Alive on Friday Nights." Kristine is one of 12 mentors at this site in San Diego, which has counterparts in 69 other middle school sites in California. Kristine follows in the footsteps of teen leaders who have been an integral part of Project ALERT here for the past four years. At O'Farrell, the high school students volunteer not only for the community service hours or the leadership aspects of the program, but also for the chance to learn and educate themselves and their uninformed protégés. "Today, we are going to be building bridges out of newspaper and tape," Kristine begins, holding up the limited supplies in each hand. "We are going to use this activity to continue talking about peer pressure."

With popular mentor-inspired techniques that work towards teamwork such as the human knot, and acting out skits on substance abuse prevention modeled after Project ALERT videos, the teen leaders have discovered some of the most effective and inviting ways to promote an alcohol, tobacco, drug-free lifestyle. Now combining FNL with the skills-based ALERT curriculum is no small enterprise for the common clique-seeking high school student. On the contrary, the teens brought on board are available and independent; some might even be described as confident, alert with a philanthropic flair. After being recruited and approved by faculty referral, a two-day training camp, a one-hour per week planning assembly and - in San Diego County - a leadership class conveniently arranged during their school day, mentors are fully aware of the challenges involved in taking on such a responsible role.

Why FNL Chose Project ALERT

Since Friday Night Live opened its doors to Project ALERT in 2002, community funds have been provided by the Tulare County Office of Education and the State Department of Alcohol

and Drug Programs. In response to the "No Child Left Behind" act, the organization has met the standards for a science-based program through the implementation of Project ALERT. Dr. Jim Kooler, Director of the California Friday Night Live Partnership, comments on the integration of Project ALERT as a "wonderful evolution in our system. It [FNL] is assisting 27 counties in operating more effectively now with an evidence-based component like Project ALERT that provides good tools for young people."

One outspoken 7th grade protégé named Michelle Abuya echo's Dr. Kooler's observation, "If there was no Project ALERT, we would not understand the issues as well about why not to drink and do drugs." The room falls silent with nodding heads. "And it is really cool to have the mentors here," she says. "We can relate to them more since they've just gone through the pressures in middle school."

The lessons provided by ALERT are clearly defined and adhered to, sparked by Friday Night Live's creative activities that make it their own proficient mentor-support system. "We still aim to keep the fidelity of Project ALERT," Lawrence says, "and maintain the structure of the program as much as we can, but we need to adjust it for mentoring purposes." He slows his words down, and pauses on the question of whether or not the extra effort to implement Project ALERT using teen leaders is worth it. "Definitely, it is a great program. We haven't had any problems with it. We started with Project ALERT, and the only thing I've known is the positive difference I see in students."

This Tuesday, as on every Tuesday in San Diego's Skyline neighborhood, the teen leaders commute from their high school up the street to O'Farrell where their protégés eagerly await; several of them, as usual, have changed into colorful, uniform-free attire. When asked, before the bell, just how big a part the mentors play throughout the session, Lawrence responds, "We try to go with a real youth development model; *they* are the ones who plan it, implement it, evaluate it." As with all the other Friday Night Live middle school sites, Project ALERT is taught 11 out of the 16 mentoring weeks. The rest of the youth development curriculum covers topics such as bullying, media influence, the transition to high school, and self-esteem. Bringing in Project ALERT to bolster FNL's mentoring foundation helps prepare the protégés who enter the after-school program loaded down with behavioral and family-related problems. Often, the students are shy, withdrawn, and anxious about graduating. Come end of April, when the 16 sessions have been completed, the students depart with certificates in hand only to return eagerly the following year as mentors.

The Protégé Perspective

One 8th grade protégé, Roland Tespado, takes a deep breath before sharing a bit about his experience with Project ALERT at FNL. "The thing is, we learn, and have fun doing it." He looks around the room at his peers. "It is a place to make new friends, find out what drugs and alcohol can do to you, especially alcohol when you drive," he adds, shaking his head as if he knows something no one else does. He sits calmly, talking about how much he enjoys listening

to the teen leaders, because they are like kids too. Only here, in this particular environment, there is an added respect their presence discreetly commands. The Project ALERT video, "Lindsey's Choice," makes sense to Roland - *don't take the cigarette, find another alternative like getting a soda, or find someone else to like who isn't a smoker*. But before he could come to any conclusion about withstanding the pressures of smoking a cigarette, Roland was staring at his hardest lesson yet. The afternoon he and his mentor eased into the ample one-on-one time that occurs every week, Roland finally could understand the realities of peer pressure.

The mentor-protégé relationship, with its underlying confidentiality, is only broken and reported to administration by the *three hurts law* - someone is hurting you, you are hurting yourself, or someone else. This bond offers encouragement and guidance to the protégé in a unique fashion - one that several middle school students repeated as being far different from any sole involvement a teacher or advisor could offer. Roland straightens up his shoulders, enthused by the opportunity to speak about the friends he has persuaded to join FNL. "I am going to be a mentor. I want to help others." At age 14, Roland's spirited willingness to educate represents a majority of the class. This level of commitment among youth who appear jubilant and serious about the chance to promote a healthier lifestyle can best be defined as the product of "Project ALERT with a mentoring twist," Lawrence says, surveying the room. In the last few moments of Friday Night Live, the sound of giggling kids brings a smile to his face.

Project ALERT Motivates Best With a Mentoring Twist

There was a point when the FNL program at O'Farrell Community School had to work through timid, uncomfortable exchanges between mentors and protégés. The result after a couple of workshops? Trust, friendship - and most significantly - a sense of belonging. "Project ALERT is making a huge difference in middle school youth," Kristine says, sitting on her usual one-on-one bench. Her genuinely caring nature makes her the ideal confidante. As someone who has seen and heard the characteristic host of stories that come with being a Skyline community resident, Kristine cherishes each session at O'Farrell. "It's too easy to get a hold of it," she adds, in a discussion about substances that show up frequently at her high school. Her efforts over the past three years, to help build the strength, confidence and resistance skills among younger kids, are what keep bringing her back every year. Kristine points to one girl in a corner of the courtyard, "She is my protégé. She just told me she wants to be a mentor next year." In this moment, it is clear why Lawrence has hired Kristine to join the Friday Night Live staff.

Kristine may only be one out of hundreds of mentors throughout the state, but the feelings among her mentoring friends in San Diego are mutual. "Overall, I just love the one-on-one time and the relationship you form with the protégés. Everyone gets so close." Although there was no program comparable to FNL when Kristine and her peers were in middle school, Jim Kooler has put FNL on the fast track. Wanting to ensure that the sites expand wherever possible in the coming years, Jim has one clear objective in mind: "We will make 100% sure the mentoring program successfully utilizes Project ALERT." Kooler doesn't seem to miss a beat. "With the

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organization's willingness to work with us, they ensure that these tools are youth-friendly and youth-driven within the Friday Night Live system. We have great admiration for Project ALERT."

In a neighborhood like Skyline, known for its high amounts of drug use, meeting mentors Kristine Negado and Mark Dayrit reaffirms the many reasons for promoting such an influential program as Friday Night Live. "Just knowing that there are alcohol deaths every fifteen minutes, it scares me." Mark says, squinting over at a pair of students quietly engaged in their one-on-one time. He continues, "being surrounded by drinkers and smokers, makes me think about how this generation will grow up and raise their own children. The teen leader advantage can really help people, you know?" Mark is a unique fellow for the simple fact that he is a freshman in college and is still volunteering for Friday Night Live. He looks forward to each week's session with the mindset that he is saving one more boy or girl. "Every school should have a program like this one."