

November 2004

## **Los Gatos Finds a Way To Keep Teens "Alive...and Loving Life"**

*The City of Los Gatos won an Award for Excellence in the Public Safety category of the 2004 California Cities Helen Putnam Award for Excellence.*

In November 2002, a fatal traffic collision following a teen party took the life of Eric Quesada, a Los Gatos High School student. This accident, which involved alcohol intoxication, shook the close-knit community of Los Gatos and exposed a strong culture of high-risk behavior by teens who were using alcohol and drugs.

Key community leaders, including the chief of police and high school principal, enlisted the help of 35 teen and adult team members from more than 20 different interest groups and organizations. Called "Alive ... and Loving Life," this team created an initiative: "To create a healthy and safe community committed to sharing responsibility for each other while supporting youth to be healthy, capable and confident in life." The goal was to change the current culture of high-risk behavior among teens. Alive ... and Loving Life fully engages the teens of the community in solutions to high-risk behavior and pairs them with adults to find common ground.

### **Looking for Answers**

This broad-based coalition began its work by identifying the compelling issue that would get people to the table to work on a solution: "What really killed Eric?" This was a reference to the underlying issue of teens making bad decisions. The coalition identified key areas of focus for future work, including:

- Cops and kids;
- Alcohol and drug use among teens and pre-teens;
- Underage sex;
- The importance of music to teens as a means of expression;
- The lack of teen activities, which leads to excessive partying; and
- The lack of parental accountability and responsibility for the behavior of their children.

On March 8, 2003, more than 350 members of the community met at the Los Gatos High School gym to participate in a "community conversation" and to plan projects that would move the community closer to the vision of the initiative. People from all walks of life attended, including police officers, school officials, teachers, students, alumni, parents, business owners, nonprofit representatives and members of the faith community. Everyone attended because they were concerned about the high-risk behavior of teens.

After the initial meeting, attendees broke into smaller discussion groups facilitated by teen and adult teams from the core group members. The breakout groups brainstormed reasons for and solutions to the underlying high-risk behaviors. Each group reported its ideas and selected one that would be implemented initially. This first public event demonstrated the commitment of the Los Gatos/Monte Sereno Police Department, the core community group and the entire community to working on these issues. This was also the first time in Los Gatos the community had come together in this way to tackle such a formidable social issue. A business-sponsored community barbecue was held after the event to celebrate the successful day.

Following the community conversation, the Police Department began working with all of the project teams, especially the Cops and Kids team. A key area of concern was the perceived manner in which police dispersed teen parties. At the party that led to Eric Quesada's death, the teens believed that the police had responded too aggressively and the kids leaving the party "fled" out of fear that they would be arrested. In fact, the responding officers were not actually from the Los Gatos/Monte Sereno Police Department, but from an adjoining jurisdiction. While the police response was not as the teens judged it, this misperception strained relations between teens and police within the community.

Los Gatos/Monte Sereno Police Chief Scott Seaman asked two sergeants to evaluate how officers responded to juvenile parties and make recommendations on guidelines for future law enforcement

response. These guidelines would then be shared with youth of the community as an educational tool to generate discussion and improve understanding between teens and police.

#### Developing Solutions

At the recommendation of the sergeants, the Police Department changed its philosophy in responding to youth-related issues. The Los Gatos/Monte Sereno Police Department became more engaged with local teenagers and adjusted the balance of its approach between prevention, intervention and enforcement.

Alive ... and Loving Life resulted in the implementation of the following new programs:

- A newly formed, council-appointed Youth Commission with 15 members from five grade levels to give youth a voice in community and municipal affairs. More than 100 Los Gatos teens applied for these positions.
- An Under 21 Club stages events for teens, and recently held its second successful event.
- A music concert series for teens produced by teens is now in its second year.
- High school- and middle school-based programs for diversity appreciation and relationship-building between police and youth have been established.
- The high school has instituted a freshman skills training for teens and their parents, using teens as teachers.

Other measurable progress has been made on police and teen activities: diversity training where police officers partner with kids; a rotating school resource officer at Los Gatos High School; an Adopt a Cop program at the junior high school; and Safe Rides, where kids and adults are teamed to provide rides for teens who have been drinking alcohol.

Alive ... and Loving Life has strengthened police relations within the community. The initiative has created an infrastructure, specifically between the police department and community groups, that fosters open communication and collaboration.

The tragic death of Eric Quesada gave the community the courage to recognize that its culture must change. Los Gatos responded with Alive ... and Loving Life, which continues its hard work today. The Los Gatos community, its partners and involved parents are committed to avoiding the loss of another child to a sense-less death.

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