

The Ivanhoe plan

Schools have been the focal point in making the town safer for children

By Paul Hurley

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December 2007—IVANHOE — Classic collaboration — schools, parents, law enforcement and business — is turning what was once open gang turf in Ivanhoe into a safer place for children and their families.

Ivanhoe, an unincorporated community of about 4,500 people seven miles northeast of Visalia, continues to be heavily populated with gangs and has many needs as a community, but residents there are noticing a difference.

Teresa Rosa has lived in Ivanhoe for 31 of her 41 years. "There are a lot of gang members here," she said. "They're not too bad — graffiti and noise mostly. It's gotten safer here in the past three years or so. "The school helps. A lot of things happen thanks to the school."

Ivanhoe Elementary School is as close to a community center as there is in Ivanhoe. Principal Debbie Cardoza recognizes the school's importance to the community and responds accordingly. "Parents will tell us things that are going on they won't tell to the police," she said. Tulare County Sheriff's Department Deputy Travis Shaw agrees the school is a valuable partner in law enforcement.

"People trust the school, and they will tell them things they won't tell to somebody in uniform. It's a cultural thing," Shaw said.

So Shaw spends a lot of time at the school, building relationships with children and conducting programs such as barbecues, mentoring and after-school programs. "The partnership with the Tulare County sheriff's office is great," Cardoza said. "They're really trying to help build a community."

The school is the center of programs that serve not just students but families. Or anyone. "The school does a lot for people, even if they don't have students in the school," Rosa said. "I had a problem, and I said something about it to a substitute teacher, and they fixed it." The school includes English and other classes from the Visalia Adult School, the Parent Institute for Quality Education and mentoring programs for students to teach leadership, among other things.

Recently the school graduated 56 parents from PIQE, in addition to the 124 parents who graduated from the program last year. Sixth-grader Sophia Bedolla said she was happy to see her mother graduate from the program.

"It helps me a lot," Bedolla said. "It helps me and my mother communicate. And it helps my mother understand what I do."

Another sixth-grader said that seeing her mother graduate helps her form her goals.

"It makes me want to go to college," Blanca Meza said. "I want to graduate, too. I want to study art and music."

Both girls were among a dozen fourth-, fifth- and sixth-graders participating in a mentoring program that includes leader training and other classes. The students recently completed etiquette training that included a dinner at the Vintage Press restaurant in Visalia. Dressed in their best clothes, the students had dinner with an invited guest while Tiffany Smith of Premiere Etiquette advised them on the niceties of fine dining.

Stan Simpson of Buckman-Mitchell Insurance of Visalia paid for the dinner. "I went to Stan and told him we would like to do this for the kids, but it wasn't in our budget," Cardoza said. "He jumped right on board.

"It's a great example of how businesses get involved in this, too." The entire mentoring program includes antibullying training for all students, tutoring programs adult education and others, all thanks to a \$500,000, five-year grant from the state.

"It works because it's a collaboration of schools, business, law enforcement and the community," Cardoza said.

Shaw participates in many of these programs, including the dinner at the Vintage Press, barbecues with the students and outings. He and other county deputies recently accompanied children to a pumpkin patch for a day of selecting pumpkins.

Shaw is a regular around the school where he converses with the students, which also helps with law enforcement.

"These kids will tell you things about their home life — 'my daddy has a gun,' or 'I saw my uncles cooking meth' — that give you an idea of what's happening out there. Then we can follow up." Shaw is also a regular at the Ivanhoe Boys and Girls Club down Avenue 332 from the school. And these days when he is driving from one to the other he'll have a crowd of kids around him.

"I've been out here a year-and-a-half," Shaw said. "And it takes time to get to know the kids and get them to know you. But now they're getting used to us. It's about making personal connections to help serve the community."

Shaw points to the 150 children in the Ivanhoe Police Athletic League program. Ivanhoe has a student in the TCSO Explorers program and 30 regular students working with deputies in mentoring.

Shaw also spends time at the Boys and Girls Club, another partner in the effort to keep children safe. About 35 students visit the center every day after school. It is the site of a PULSE after-school program for middle-school students.

"If we weren't here, we'd be getting into trouble," Jorge Herrera, a seventh-grader, said. "There's a lot of bad influences out there." Club director Eli Venegas knows what they are. Now 25, he grew up in Ivanhoe and knows how easy it is for children to get into trouble. "It helps I grew up here," he said. "I know these kids' older brothers and sometimes parents and uncles. And they know me and make the connection. Having relationships with these kids helps me and them. Sometimes I can anticipate some trouble they might have at home or in their neighborhood."

The collaboration of those elements — school, youth center, law enforcement and business — has had a positive effect, but Ivanhoe still has many needs. Teresa Rosa wishes there were more places to shop. Ivanhoe doesn't have a full supermarket. Prices for items are high.

"And we could use a park," Rosa said. "Some place that can be a community center.

"And a police station