

Golfers Tee Off to Give Youngsters a Better Chance at Life

Mercury News - (May 20th, 2001) A poster on the wall of Unity Care Group's office says: "Some people dream of success while others wake up and work hard at it."

Golfers who tee off Monday in the second annual Virginia Clay Unity Care Group Golf Tournament should know for whom they strike the ball. They will be playing for Unity Care resident Ed, 17, who, in a one-week period, lost six people he knew, including a cousin, to the insanity of street violence. The tournament, named after a Palo Alto woman interested in the education of young people, also will benefit people like Jose, who turned 18 Saturday and has lived in group homes and foster care all of his life. "I was taken away from my mom at 1 or 2 years old. I never knew her," said Jose, who wears an embellished silver cross around his neck. He is a seven-month Unity Care resident studying for the General Education Development high school equivalency exam.

The golfers also will tee off for Vanessa, 17, who has been in foster homes all over California since she was 12 and years to graduate from college, join the FBI and specialize in crimes against children. Many of Unity Care's 500 youngsters can tell stories of struggle, pain, abandonment, abuse, crime, success, failure and determination.

The non-profit youth development agency is based in San Jose. It provides disadvantaged, at-risk young people with safe housing, educational opportunities and career exposure and preparation. It was the brainchild of president and CEO Andre Chapman, 35, who grew up in Palo Alto and graduated from Gunn High School and San Jose State University. As a student, he and his Pi Beta Sigma fraternity brothers would pick up at-risk kids in East Palo Alto each week, take them to campus and talk about college and careers.

"Each time we would get them, they were worse than the last time because they were going back to the same negative environment," said Chapman, an Avanti MAGIC award winner for community service. "I thought then that if we could have them for all seven days, we could have a greater impact on their ability to succeed."

After graduation, Chapman became director of sales for a high-tech company. While calling on a Southern California client, he was taken to see a group home.

"I had prayed hard and said, 'Lord, what is it that you want me to do?' " Chapman said, sitting in his office at Unity Care. "When I saw the group home, I said, 'This is it!'"

Filling the Potholes

Unity Care began in 1992 and, in 1993, opened the first of 12 group homes in Santa Clara County. Backed by corporate and foundation funds, the agency offers a residential and a technological side. "We grew based on the potholes our kids had fallen into," Chapman explained. After-school classes provide sessions such as leadership, anger management, self-esteem, career/academics planning and violence prevention. A big project is the Pre-College Minority Engineering Program for low-achieving, minority middle school students. "A lot of these kids are not that far off; they just need support," said manager Shon Ellerbe, who, like many he helps, was reared by his mother because his stepfather was "in and out." Besides corporate funds, the engineering program receives tournament proceeds. Chapman credits Roy Clay of Palo Alto with starting the tournament.

Raising Awareness

The event is named for Clay's wife, Virginia, who died of cancer in 1995. She knew Chapman as a little boy and always had young people in her home. They related to her as a godparent, said Clay, founder and CEO of Rod-L Electronics in Menlo Park. The program, designed to increase awareness of career opportunities in computer sciences and engineering, "fits Silicon Valley's industrial lifestyle," Clay said. Many of the agency's youngsters are in foster care.

Chapman says in 1999, African-Americans were 17 percent of Santa Clara County's foster care caseload, though they are only 4 percent of the population. Latinos make up 46 percent of kids in foster care and 23 percent of the county's population, he said. Unity Care has foster homes as well as a transitional home for those who have "aged out" of foster care.

Vanessa's determination to study sociology and psychology at San Jose City College before pursuing her FBI dream inspires the staff. Some of her zeal no doubt is driven by the will to overcome what she describes as a horrific home life that included years of physical and sexual abuse. The agency is obtaining a four-year scholarship for her. It's a big thing, but Vanessa also remembers how huge it was when the agency paid for her cheerleading outfit.

"I felt like a real teenager for the first time," she said. When Jose leaves, he has a job at Great America operating rides. He hopes to return to his adoptive father's home, but ultimately plans to join the Marines. Ed is also in the GED program and has a job lined up. And, says Ed, "I've seen myself change. "I used to have a don't-care attitude. I'd get mad at myself and just go somewhere and smoke. But here I have someone I can talk to." Staffers made him realize that his previous direction could make for a short life, he said, "And I believe it's really not worth it."