

Kids help kids get it write

By Melissa Pamer Staff Writer

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Group president Luke Southwell passes out information sheets to other members of PressFriends during a lunchtime meeting. The group is helping elementary school students form campus newspapers. (Scott Varley Staff Photographer)

While many middle-schoolers are still grasping the finer points of grammar and sentence structure, some students in Rancho Palos Verdes are teaching younger ones how to write.

And even in the Internet age, they're doing it the old-fashioned way: by creating student newspapers.

"What we basically do is try to start newspapers and have fun while writing them, without trying to make it seem like school-work," said eighth-grader Luke Southwell.

He's the president of the 22-member PressFriends, a group founded by a collection of young former editors of the student newspaper at Dapplegray Elementary in Rolling Hills Estates. The members are now students at Miraleste Intermediate School in Rancho Palos Verdes. Since 2008, they've been helping elementary schools - typically in less socioeconomically fortunate areas - set up student newspapers.

On Tuesday, the Rolling Hills Estates City Council will honor the students, presenting PressFriends members with the President's Volunteer Service Award and California's Governor and First Lady's Service Award.

The group is a project of Community Partners, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that offers support for new initiatives that build community,

At a lunchtime meeting last week in a classroom at Miraleste, PressFriends members made plans for meetings at a handful of schools that they're mentoring.

In December, they guided the publication of issues of the Roosevelt Times, at F.D. Roosevelt Elementary in Lawndale, and Dragon Tales, at Leland Street Elementary in San Pedro.

Featured were interviews with principals and other school district officials, along with reviews of movies, handheld game consoles and neighborhood restaurants.

"We try to make writing fun for the kids and get them to work together," Ashley Trutanich said. "In a newspaper, there are so many things to write about. There's something for every kid."

But sometimes the younger children pick topics the older students have concerns about - such as the "Twilight" series, which they deemed not age-appropriate. Another was the types of gangs found in one school's neighborhoods.

"It's hard for them to find a topic that's good for their brains," said Haley Dellis.

That kind of interaction is part of the goal of the group, according to one of the nonprofit's adult advisory board members, Joe Condon, the former superintendent of Lawndale School District.

"It exposes them to different groups of kids. That's important at a social level," Condon said. "It also creates that kind of cross-cultural relationship that they may not have either."

Getting students from the largely affluent Palos Verdes Peninsula exposed to children in less wealthy communities was one of the goals of the group, said Debora Southwell, Luke's mother and a PressFriends board member.

And for the younger children, it reinforces school lessons by putting academics to use in a more practical arena, PressFriends members said.

"I know this is going to sound pretty cliché, but these children are America's future. I hope PressFriends lets them know they can do anything they set their minds to and anyone will listen," Ashley said.

Condon said he believes the newspaper mentoring program could be successfully applied to school districts elsewhere.

Meanwhile, PressFriends has been talking to the Boys & Girls Club in San Pedro about starting a newspaper program there. And in the meantime, the group will be working on mentoring skills by helping out with projects at two schools on The Hill.

Next year, when many of the group's founders move on to ninth grade at Palos Verdes Peninsula High, they plan to start a chapter there.

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