



Pride and passion. These are the two key ingredients needed for any organization to be successful. It is this combination that has led Pro Youth/HEART to touch the lives of more than 4,000 afterschool students throughout Tulare County. With a 90 percent positive approval rating from parents, one question remains—how did Pro Youth/HEART become such a powerful advocate for afterschool care?

It was a senseless act of violence that rocked the community nearly two decades ago that became the catalyst for change. A local doctor sitting at a stoplight in his car with his toddler daughter was caught in the crossfire between two gangs. The man was hit by a stray bullet and killed.

Through an outpouring of concern and a deep desire to stop the gang violence, Pro Youth (which had been operating for several years under the name, Visalians for a Gang-Free Community) wanted to take a stand. Answering the request of the youth in the area—who knew they were more likely to get into trouble afterschool and also afraid of being victims of violence during that time—the Homework, Enrichment, Acceleration, Recreation and Teamwork (HEART) program became a safe haven for students afterschool in Tulare County.

Laurie Isham, chief executive officer for Pro Youth started the organization in 1991 with the mission to create a safer community. After the shooting, Isham said their focus shifted.

“The summit was attended by 1000 to 2000 middle school kids. They said they wanted to feel safe afterschool. After the summit we raised \$400,000 through local donors and supporters and the city, and then opened three sites,” she said.

HEART has been moving forward ever since. In 2000, they received the After School Education

and Safety (ASES) grant and grew their program from three sites to seven. The following year they received a federal grant and grew from assisting 700 students to working with 1200 students. Today, HEART is operating at 28 elementary, middle, and high school sites in five school districts throughout Tulare County, with approximately 280 employees. All of their services are free of charge.

“It’s more than just academics. It’s enrichment and learning to make good choices.” said Isham.

For example, through their work with Visalia Unified School District, HEART uses specific afterschool curriculum that aligns with lessons from the regular school day.

“Our view is that learning should be active and collaborative. It involves listening to others and allowing each person to contribute,” said Bud Darwin, training director for Pro Youth/HEART.

In an effort to contribute to the whole child’s development, afterschool leaders ensure students are exposed to a variety of activities like the symphony and museums.

“We give the kids opportunities to try new things,” said Jessica Brasher, Pro Youth/HEART site director at Mineral King elementary school in the Visalia Unified School District.

Brasher, who has been with HEART for one year, supervises 11 afterschool employees and 166 students. She hopes the activities the students experience lead them to develop a sense of confidence.

“Maybe it is discovering that they are really good at soccer, or that they really like science, or maybe they are really interested in computers,” said Brasher.

Most recently, HEART has launched a new pilot program that looks at how STEM curriculum is implemented in schools. STEM specialists are assigned to school sites and are teaching in the areas of life science, physical science and astronomy. This semester, HEART is targeting third through sixth grade students in the pilot program. This organized effort alone is a prime example of the continued effort HEART puts forth to improve the quality of service they offer students.

From the site directors, to the program leaders, intervention specialists, and STEM coordinators, HEART employees collaborate to make the program as best as it can be.

“It’s about the consistent delivery of the information. It’s about reinforcement and support,” said Darwin.

After extensive training, all 27 HEART site directors are assigned to a task force team that focuses on critical areas of the program. Because site directors are in constant contact with school administrators and parents, they soon become the eyes and ears for the HEART program in the field, reporting back regarding critical needs and areas of improvement.

“They have a lot of autonomy...and it allows our staff to contribute at a higher capacity,” said

Darwin.

With more than 52 training hours logged by HEART employees in the past year, their program leader process continues to grow. HEART most recently hosted an annual winter conference in early January for more than 600 afterschool employees throughout the state. The conference provided 30 different workshops that ranged from lesson planning, to cultural wellness and combating gang violence. In addition to the regular training workshops, HEART employees are now planning their annual four-week summer enrichment training program which is much like their winter conference. They are expecting between 400 to 500 Tulare County out-of-school employees to attend in July.

According to Isham, the passion and pride HEART exhibits all comes with one goal in mind, “to see the students become truly invested in their community. We want them to make good choices to make this a strong, caring community.”

To find out more information about Pro Youth/HEART’s summer enrichment program, visit their website at: [www.proyouth.org](http://www.proyouth.org)