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Filling in the gaps: Alternatives for Youth celebrates 25th anniversary

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LONGMONT — In elementary and middle school, Adilene Taboada revered the teens who led Alternatives for Youth's programs.

"I thought they were so cool," she said.

Now she's the cool one.

The 17-year-old has been attending AFY programs since she was in fifth grade. Now a senior at Skyline High School, she volunteers at AFY's summer camp and performs with the folkloric dance group. Twice a week, she tutors students at after-school homework clubs.

"Just the thought of helping people gives you a good feeling," she said after Monday's homework club at Rocky Mountain Elementary.

This year, Alternatives for Youth is celebrating 25 years of serving Longmont teens. The nonprofit offers a range of programs to help students stay in school, make good choices and avoid drugs, alcohol, violence and teen pregnancy.

Executive director Deb Roberts said the nonprofit operates by filling gaps in the community.

"We really feel that we do is a continuum of programs," she said. "We want to reach kids wherever they are."

In 1978, the organization evolved out of a Boulder program that worked with high school dropouts. After a 1980 fatal police shooting of two Hispanic youths in Longmont, racial tensions in the city escalated, and local Hispanic advocacy agency El Comité asked the organization to branch into Longmont and help with the healing process.

In 1985, Alternatives for Youth became a registered nonprofit. Over the past 25 years, it has expanded to target four areas: prevention, early intervention, intervention and rehabilitation.

Celebrando la Familia encompasses several prevention programs, including an annual summer camp, a girls' circle, a folkloric dance group, a Latino parent task force and homework clubs at four schools.

Program director Mary Vigil has been with AFY for 18 years. She began volunteering when her son, then a third-grader, announced he wanted to quit school. Befuddled, she looked for outside support to keep her three children motivated academically.

"When I was a young mother, I believed the parents' job was to discipline and the teachers' job was to teach," she said.

Vigil said AFY taught her to ask questions and get involved in her children's education. Her three children have all since graduated from high school, but she has stayed with AFY to pass along similar advice to parents and teens.

She said many of the nonprofit's clients are Hispanic, and they sometimes need a push — much like she did — to assert themselves in their children's education.

AFY served 1,024 children and parents in 2008. About 94 percent were low-income, and 72 percent were Hispanic.

In fall 2008, AFY hired six attendance advocates to ease truancy among middle and high school students and plant the seeds for early intervention.

Starting in 2005, the organization began offering classes to instill life skills in teen boys. Now known as NorthStar, the intervention program educates adolescent boys about communication and positive behavior.

Right now, Roberts is trying to secure funding for teen alcohol and drug intervention program — another gap in the community, she said.

To address the rehabilitation focus area, AFY established Clearview Educational Center, a transitional program for middle and high school students who have been expelled from schools in the St. Vrain Valley School District. Through grants, the center began six-hour school days last year.

Over the next 25 years, Roberts hopes AFY will continue to adapt to the community's needs and keep strong partnerships with the school district, the Longmont Police Department and local agencies.

Taboada, now an honor roll student and captain of Skyline's cheerleading squad, said she credits AFY with helping her overcome her initial shyness and instilling in her a strong sense of community service.

"It's been a good experience," she said. "I've learned how to take the leadership role with other things."



Alternatives for Youth is celebrating its 25th anniversary with a fundraiser on Feb. 13. One of the programs AFY runs is a homework club at one middle school and three elementary schools, including Rocky Mountain Elementary, where Skyline senior Adilene Taboada helps Vanessa Vonilla, 10, on Monday. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**