

Many 'Hands' help in gang prevention - January 30, 2010

Lester Moon drew on his own experience as a child when founding Hands in the Community.

"I grew up in what would have been classified now as an at-risk family," he said.

"My parents divorced when I was 13. Different families adopted me, all from Christian homes. They got involved in my life; it wasn't just a peripheral role. They weren't just throwing clothes at me. They were disciplining me."

Moon has used that model for 12 after-school programs in Visalia sponsored by Hands in the Community, which is also developing several more throughout the county.

"Hands in the Community is involving people in people's lives in such a way that the only response for the children is this person really cares about me, and that's how relationships happen."

Gang prevention and gang intervention are all about developing relationships. Those who work with at-risk youth say the relationships made with children are the critical factor in keeping them away from gangs.

Moon said his organization's after-school programs are connecting with between 700 and 850 students a week.



Caressa Castro races in a memory verse relay game during the Calvary Kids Bible Club after-school program at Manuel F. Hernandez Elementary School. The program is free to public schools and is funded by Calvary Chapel Visalia and Reaching Youth, a nonprofit community organization. (Ron Holman)

"That means that those kids are not going out after school and getting into trouble. They're hearing positive things, getting good role models," he said.



Third-grader Eddie Morales sings with classmates during the Calvary Kids Bible Club after-school program at Manuel F. Hernandez Elementary School. (Ron Holman)

Moon founded Hands almost two years ago, on Valentine's Day, 2008. A member of Grace Community Church, he was looking for a way to connect with those in need in the community.

From the organization's Web site: "Hands in the Community is a nonprofit organization established to provide crisis and short-term referral services in Tulare County. We serve as a network, connecting services and resources between those who need them and those who can provide them. Working with existing organizations, as well as volunteers, we focus on not only fulfilling the needs of our community, but on building relationships and bridging gaps.

"Our client base consists primarily of children, families and low-income individuals. We provide a variety of resources."

In less than two years, the organization has grown to have about 790 volunteers who serve various roles in the community in providing a wide range of social and support services for the elderly, the poor, the sick and children.

The after-school programs predated the founding of Hands in the Community.

The first program was founded six years ago at Conyer Elementary School, and the programs are operated variously by local churches, including Grace Community, Calvary Chapel, First Presbyterian, Neighborhood and Visalia Evangelical Free, among others.

"Last Christmas, we were helping kids from Crowley School with Ambassadors for Christ Church, and it took me back to when churches came to my home and brought gifts," Moon said.

Many of the prevention efforts in Visalia are operating under stress or short-handed because of budget cuts, especially the ones that rely on public funding or are government operated.

Nonprofits and faith-based organizations have an opportunity to fill that need. Moon notes that his and other private organizations are more flexible and nimble when it comes to meeting immediate needs in the community.

"Our volunteers are not only providing information, they are listening to these kids about their families' needs," Moon said. "They hear from a child whose father might be out of work, or they are told about a mother who hasn't smiled in six years because she has chipped teeth.

"We can address those needs immediately and help the father get job referrals or training or get the mother to a dentist."

From the organization's Web site:

"One of the best places to focus our efforts is on young children before they become involved in gangs.

"There are anti-gang programs already in place; unfortunately, these subsidized programs will be reduced in the coming school year because of budget cuts.

"Visalia Unified School District welcomes any assistance the churches can provide [Bible clubs, reading programs, etc.] because they are free and a change in student bodies has already become evident where churches are involved."

With its heavy emphasis on volunteers, Hands is economical.

Moon said the organization has \$18,000 annually in donations, but he estimates it provides as much as a half million in services.

"If a nonprofit organization delivers services to the amount of 70 percent of their donations, that's good. We're delivering 1,400 percent."

Moon has always aimed high, even when his own situation was low.

He went from high-school and college dropout to earning his degree at Cornell University. He has developed other community-based organizations in the Bay Area.

His goal for after-school programs is to have them in all 22 elementary schools in Visalia.

"These are the ways that faith-based organizations can be so effective in the community," he said. "We're going to keep offering that influence."