



Joel Rosales, 10, plays a computer game with Roberto Alvarez, a development analyst with SCE.

Press-Telegram photos / Matthew J. Lee

Adults help steer at-risk youths

By Daniel de Vise
Staff writer

LONG BEACH — Song Tan leaves his medical practice in the city's Cambodian community at lunch time every Thursday to spend an hour with 10-year-old Thaingson Thik.

The two eat school lunches together, talk about their families, and then run off to shoot some baskets in the Lincoln Elementary schoolyard. Thaingson usually doesn't smile, but sometimes Tan puts his arms around the shy fifth-grader and squeezes one out.

Tan, 44, has been visiting Thaingson since last spring in hope of persuading the boy to follow in his footsteps rather than those of Thaingson's older brother. The brother is a gang member, and he is in jail.

"I met his dad, mom, sisters," said Tan, a pediatrician. "Nice family. They just lose control of their kids."

The two sat down Thursday for a picnic lunch on the front lawn of Lincoln Elementary along with 10 other students and their adult buddies. It was the final meeting of the Role Model program, an 11-week volunteer effort run by the school and United Cambodian Community Inc., a neighborhood agency.

Lincoln Elementary lies in a tough neighborhood where Long Beach's Cambodian and Latino communities intersect, and where rival ethnic gangs sometimes trade drive-by gunfire. The school's 1,170 students are 48 percent Cambodian, 41 percent Latino, 7 percent African-American and 4 percent other ethnicities, said Principal Raymond Rivera.

Show options to gangs, drugs



Navy Lt. Grant Stewart listens to Emilio Hernandez and Robert Walker at the piano.

The Role Model program began in spring to aid the Lincoln students most at risk of failing in school or succumbing to gangs or drugs. Teachers pick the pupils from the

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fourth and fifth grades.

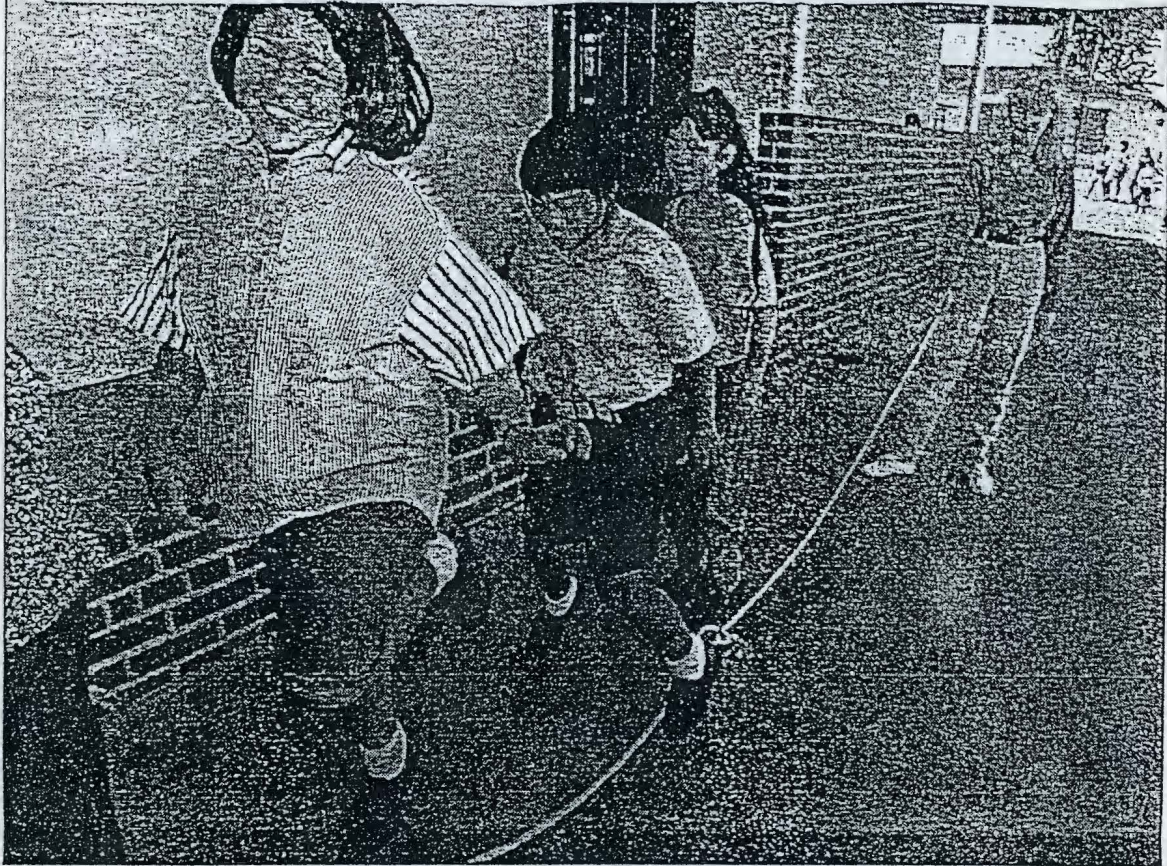
Adults volunteer for the program, committing to spend 11 Thursdays with the youngsters. Both students and adults may re-enroll for additional sessions.

Joel Rosales, 10, didn't know what was going on when he walked in for the first lunch with his Role Model.

"He comes in, and his eyes are about this big," said Roberto Alvarez, 32, forming his thumbs and index fingers into circles around his eyes and coaxing a laugh from Joel. "I say, 'You probably think you're in trouble.' He says, 'Yeah.'"

After 11 weeks of meetings, they talk, laugh and tumble in the grass. They are

PLEASE SEE ROLE/D3



Karen Draffan, a registered nurse, holds jump rope for Johanna Sierra, Nancy Arroyo and Juanita Tapia. Press-Telegram photos / Matthew J. Lee

ROLE: Adults help steer kids from gangs, drugs

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inseparable.

"We like baseball," Alvarez said. "The Dodgers. He likes the Angels, but I'm not too hot on the Angels."

Directors of the Role Model program are impressed with the progress their volunteers have made after only a few hour-long meetings, but both they and the volunteers wish it lasted longer.

"I don't think that 11 weeks is very long," said Grant Stewart, a Navy lieutenant who plays piano with his two 10-year-old Role Model pals, the reserved Robert Walker and the bubbly Emilio Hernandez. "Especially to someone like Robert, who just started opening up."

Role Model coordinators hope to expand the program, funded by the federal Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. "We also hope to follow these children through five years, to see if there is a change in their

lives," said Director Elizabeth Koo.

For Rosales and Alvarez, who grew up in the same central Long Beach neighborhood, the bond was immediate and lasting. From the moment they met, the Southern California Edison computer worker and the Lincoln fifth-grader had a lifer's experience in common.

"Joel, he's not part of a gang, but he runs into these things," Alvarez said. "These are experiences that I lived through, and he's living through them now. I just walked away from it, and that's what he's doing now."

Rosales said one of his favorite times with his Role Model was the day he showed Alvarez his drawings, classroom pictures of firemen and policemen.

"That's what he wants to be," Alvarez said, patting the boy on the back.

"Yeah," Rosales said. "So I can be a hero."



Pediatrician Song Tan plays basketball with Thaingson Thik.