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SCU reaches out to East Side

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By Joanne Grant
Mercury News Staff Writer

THE mostly Anglo and affluent Santa Clara University has moved into heavily Hispanic and poor East San Jose.

The physical plant hasn't been trucked across town, but the Jesuit university and order have

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— *Sonia Avitia, student*

made a five-year commitment to the people living on the East Side.

SCU's Eastside Project began before Assemblyman John Vasconcellos' recent proposal for a California Human Corps that would require college students to devote time to public service.

SCU's commitment is deeper than that envisioned by Vasconcellos, D-San Jose, and a graduate of the university.

Three Jesuits have taken up residence in the heart of Most Holy Trinity parish, a large, culturally diverse community, much of it poor and poorly served.

They've met with community members to determine what

needs to be done, then called on students to help fill those needs. This year, about 250 students participated.

“I didn't really think it was going to have the backing that it does,” says student Sonia Avitia, a native of Mexico who grew up in San Jose. “This is a predominantly white school. What I've seen is the students are not very interested in what's going on in the rest of the world . . . and they don't care. I was very surprised to see so many people volunteer.”

Students tutor, run a physical education program at Gardner Children's Center and work with the homeless mentally ill at the Julian Street Inn.

At the Family Place, students also help provide free lunches for women and their children, as well as assist in parenting and English classes.

Right now, the primary focus is the legalization program for undocumented workers, with students joining community members as volunteers in a legalization office at Most Holy Trinity.

About half the student volunteers are Hispanic and bilingual, and three are from Most Holy Trinity parish. For Avitia, a 20-year-old sophomore business major, joining the immigration project was a natural.

“A lot of my friends are here illegally. A lot of my people, my relatives, come here illegally. It's something very close to home for me,” she said.



Santa Clara University student Frances Ambrose tutors Joseph Munoz, 5, at Gardner School

Karen T. Borchers
Mercury News

The Eastside Project was sparked by the Rev. Sonny Manuel, 36, a licensed clinical psychologist, and the Rev. Steve Privett, 44, another SCU teacher, who decided “to put into partnership the university and the community so each side could learn from one another.”

They did not envision an outreach project like the Santa Clara Community Action Program, where students volunteer for community service.

“Instead, the community was really supposed to instruct us about its experience,” Manuel said.

Students in undergraduate psychology courses are invited to participate; students in more advanced classes, such as abnormal psychology, are required to work at the Julian Street Inn.

“They really do talk about the residents educating them. In-

stead of talking about abnormal psychology, they talk about real problems,” Manuel said.

The Rev. Dan Germann, 57, Eastside Project coordinator, said things have moved slowly because the university did not want to impose itself on the people.

“East Siders wondered if they (the students) would get credit and if that was the only reason they were coming,” he recalled.

Students were worried “because they weren't sure they'd be welcomed,” he added. During orientation, the groups role-played their fears and anxieties.

Vincente V. Perez, who is working with youth ministry at Most Holy Trinity, played an intentionally negative role.

“I was saying things like, ‘You students are going over thinking you're going to save all the poor little Mexicans,’” he recalled.

Perez, 28, grew up on the East Side and graduated from Overfelt High School. He never considered going to Santa Clara University. Instead, he earned a bachelor's degree in social science from San

Jose State University.

Initially, Perez was apprehensive about SCU's effort because he'd seen other projects come and go. “When you can't follow through, there's bitterness,” he said.

But he found that “the people are sincere.” And Jesuits living in the neighborhood is “a very visual type of sign” of commitment.

He and the Jesuits also hope their presence will show East Side students that there is a place for them at the university.

At the end of the five-year commitment, the three priests hope the project will be flourishing.

“If it's successful, it will be incorporated into the curriculum,” Privett said. “It will have a life of its own.”

