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TIMES HOLIDAY CAMPAIGN

### **Long Beach program gives disadvantaged youths a shot at college**

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Metro Desk

By Jean Merl, Times Staff Writer

The eighth-graders chosen each year for Operation Jump Start in Long Beach face difficult odds even for making it through high school on time, let alone for entering college right after graduation. "These students could so easily fall through the cracks," said Dara Cerwonka, the organization's executive director. "Our economy really depends on a college-educated work force, and by tapping [these students'] potential, we are breaking the cycle of poverty" and improving the prospects of society at large, Cerwonka added. All of the youngsters come from families living below the federal poverty line, defined as \$20,650 in annual income for a family of four. In many cases, the students' parents each hold down two or three jobs to make ends meet, leaving them with little time to sort out high school course offerings and stay on top of homework and college-entrance requirements. Some of the parents are immigrants with limited English. And no one in any of the students' families has attended college. But Operation Jump Start's mentoring program helps these students reach their potential. This year, not only did all of its students receive high school diplomas with their classmates, but 97% of them enrolled in college, most at four-year institutions.

The program serves 55 students in any given year and provides a volunteer mentor for each of them throughout the five years the students are in the program, from eighth grade through senior year of high school. About half of the students are Latino, and Asian Americans and African Americans each make up about one-quarter of the program's enrollment.

The organization's \$250,000 annual budget comes from grants and corporate and individual donations. The organization received a \$20,000 grant from The Times Holiday Campaign this year. The staff is kept small -- consisting of just three full-time positions, one part-timer and three graduate student interns -- to stretch the dollars as far as possible to meet students' needs and to train and support the work of more than 60 volunteer mentors and tutors.

"Our mission is to provide the structure and resources for our students to succeed," Cerwonka said, "and we've met our mission every year" since the program began in 1994. Working closely with middle school counselors in the Long Beach Unified School District, Operation Jump Start selects about a dozen eighth-graders and their families each year and matches them with a volunteer mentor, who has made a five-year commitment to the program. The students and the parents know that they too have made a commitment -- the students to keeping up their grades and participating in the organization's activities; the parents to providing their child with the support to succeed. Thus begins an educational journey that starts with the selection of one of Long Beach's high schools and a ninth-grade course of study, and continues through high school graduation -- and often beyond.

The program and the mentors help students stay on the college track, which includes fulfilling a complicated set of course requirements during the four years of high school -- with no Ds or Fs -- to be eligible to enter a Cal State or UC campus. (The requirements are similar for admission to most private colleges and universities.) Along the way, students will be taken on tours of college campuses, participate in leadership, cross-cultural social and charitable activities, receive tutoring as needed and be exposed to cultural experiences such as concerts and museums on donated tickets. Upon graduation, students receive a scholarship of \$500 a year for up to five years if they are in college full time. Operation Jump Start also helps obtain other scholarships from local firms

or individuals. "Our parents see the value of education but often don't know how to get it for themselves or their children," Cerwonka said. "Operation Jump Start really fills in those gaps." Mentors are the key to the program's success, Cerwonka said. Some are teachers, others come from the community. Some hear about it from other nonprofits; others through word-of-mouth. All are interested in working with youth. Each is required to undergo training and to promise to spend six to eight hours a month with his or her student during the five years. But many do much more, she said. "We've had mentors tell us they feel they get as much or more from the program as the students do," Cerwonka said. They forge strong bonds with their students and their families, and many sign up for another student when the one they mentored graduates from high school, she added.

Faustino Romero, 18, is attending Cal State Dominguez Hills, with ambitions to become a lawyer. He credits his mentor, Ted Neinast, for getting him through the college-prep rigors at Cabrillo High School and inspiring him to set high goals for himself. "My parents are really happy about it," Romero said of his status as the first in his family to go to college. "They barely speak English, so they couldn't help me with many things. My own mentor could help me out if I had problems with a class. He wouldn't give me the answers, but he'd give me tips. He'd take me places, and he got to know my parents." And the friendship continues: Romero said Neinast picked up the tab for his college textbooks this semester. Neinast, 35, a special education teacher at Long Beach's Peter H. Burnett Elementary School, said he decided to become a mentor because of the influence on his life by one or two people who took an interest in him as a youth. He said he enjoyed working with Romero and developed a close relationship with his family. "His parents are tremendously proud of him," Neinast said. "Their hopes and aspirations are tied to him, and they have made sacrifices to give him a chance." Although the five-year commitment can seem daunting, Neinast said the opportunity to help students grow and become successful is more than worth the time and effort. "The opportunity to guide them through high school and give them the support they need to succeed and transition to college is very unique," Neinast said. "The relationship you build in those years can be lifelong."

The annual Holiday Campaign is part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund, a fund of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, which this year will match every dollar raised at 50 cents on the dollar. Donations are tax deductible. For more information, call (213) 237-5771. To make credit card donations, visit [www.latimes.com/holidaycampaign](http://www.latimes.com/holidaycampaign). To send checks, use the attached coupon. Do not send cash. Unless requested otherwise, gifts of \$50 or more are acknowledged in The Times.  
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