



## A Sports Oasis for the Youth in Compton



*In a recent afternoon in Compton, Los Angeles County Deputy Sheriff Abi Ben-Sahile was standing inside a converted National Guard armory and overseeing the daily after-school offerings of the Sheriff's Youth Activity League.*



The dance team was preparing for the upcoming Cinco de Mayo celebration, and the computer area was packed with kids doing homework. A legion of aspiring Oscar De La Hoyas sparred in the boxing ring, while teams of aspiring Kobe Bryants took turns playing three-on-three basketball.

The sun was shining brightly, but no kids were playing outside the cavernous facility. The parking lot was an island of concrete and metal storage containers, bordered by a chain-link fence. It was as bleak and as desolate as a prison yard.

"It's hard selling the Youth Activity League because we're in this industrial area in Compton that is not kid-friendly," Deputy Ben-Sahile said. "We're limited in what we can do."

And yet, this uninviting space represents an oasis of hope for local youth. In a matter of days, a grant from the LA84 Foundation transformed this urban wasteland into an outdoor playscape for the community, complete with three basketball courts and an artificial-turf soccer field.

With that, the excited yelps of youngsters at play began echoing through the streets of Compton. "Being inside, it gets boring," said Angel Camacho, a fourth-grader at Mayo Elementary

School. "Now we can play outside. I'm going to come here every day."

"Before, we had to play soccer and basketball inside," said Ashley Arguello, a ninth-grader at Paramount High School. "It's great that we can be outside."

"By giving kids more sports outlets, we'll be able to attract more kids," said Deputy Ben-Sahile. "That will make the YAL program more effective and keep more kids off the streets. Hopefully, that will translate into a safer, more cohesive community."

Since 1985, the non-profit Sheriff's Youth Foundation has offered after-school enrichment programs, free of charge, in poverty-stricken and crime-ridden communities throughout Southern California. Every weekday, children ages 8 to 17 gather at YAL facilities to access computer labs, receive tutorial help, and play sports in a safe and supervised environment.

"Serving youth is the heart and soul of the Sheriff's Department," said A.J. Rotella, executive director of the Sheriff's Youth Foundation. "We're here to provide positive alternatives for the kids, through our sports and arts and education programs,

in areas that typically receive less services than places like Santa Monica and Pasadena.”

YAL serves approximately 4,000 boys and girls annually. With severe cutbacks in school budgets throughout California, YAL remains a crucial after school option. A recent study noted that “within an hour after-school lets out, 65% of high schools in California’s poorest neighborhoods close their computer labs, 73% close their libraries, and 84% close their gyms for recreational use.”

“That leaves kids with very few opportunities to do anything constructive after school,” Rotella said. “Without structure and resources, they more easily fall prey to the dangers of the streets, including drugs, gangs and juvenile crime.”

One major key to the success of YAL is providing quality facilities for the kids. In 2009, a grant from the LA84 Foundation (as well as contributions from the Annenberg Foundation) helped turn what was a large tent in the Norwalk-South Whittier area into a permanent structure that Rotella describes as “a model for what a

youth learning center should look like.”

The following year, LA84 Foundation joined with Nike and A Better LA, the charitable organization of former USC football coach Pete Carroll, to transform a parking lot in South Los Angeles into a sports complex.



At the Sheriff’s Youth Center in Lennox, youngsters now enjoy a refurbished skateboard park as well as a multi-sport court for basketball, volleyball, and soccer.

The newly constructed site in Compton marks the third partnership between LA84 Foundation and the Sheriff’s Youth Foundation. In addition, LA84 Foundation brought another non-profit group, Hugo Salcedo’s Urban Soccer Foundation, into the project to provide organized and expert soccer instruction to the children.



“What’s amazing about LA84 Foundation is their willingness to forge alliances with other organizations to ultimately serve more children,” Rotella said. “These connections are far more valuable than just an investment in dollars because it shows that their level of commitment is huge. I’m amazed at the level of support that I’ve received from Patrick [Escobar] and Gabby [Tovar]. LA84 Foundation is much more than a grant resource.”

The recent building boom has increased the number of YAL facilities to 17, up from just six 12 years ago. “As a non-profit, we have to raise our own funds,” Rotella said. “We’re not government funded. So, we’re fortunate to connect with LA84 Foundation because our goals are very complimentary.”

Rotella envisions additional success stories in the future. “There are other areas in Southern California with similar needs that we can help through YAL and with the support of LA84 Foundation,”

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he said. “The opportunities are there for us to provide quality sports and education programs for more kids every year. We want to increase that number every year.”

One challenge in attracting youth to YAL, Compton Deputy Ben-Sahile said, is that “the sheriff’s uniform can be a sticking point with some kids. What I do is get into my basketball shorts and my sneakers and get on the court every day. When they see that I’m just a regular guy and here to help them, that breaks down the barrier.”

According to ninth-grader Ashley Arguello, “A lot of kids don’t want to come here at first because it’s like, ‘Oh no, cops.’ But then you come and talk with them and you go, ‘Okay, they’re not here to get me in trouble. They’re here to protect me and give me guidance.’ Since I’ve been coming here, my grades have gone up.”

The unveiling of the newly improved Compton facility in June, said Deputy Ben-Sahile, should further help break down those barriers. “Once they see the beautiful green soccer field and the beautiful basketball courts and all the kids playing, it sends a message to the entire neighborhood: ‘We’re here, we’re better than ever, and we’re not going anywhere,’” he said.