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Peninsulans Help to Encourage Change in Central American Educational System

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For weeks now, students across the Peninsula have been preparing for graduation and the road that lies ahead. There is often little time for helping others amidst all the stresses. But at least two Peninsula students left their grades and their studies behind on a recent trip to assist schools in

Central America.

Earlier this month, Palos Verdes Estates residents Ajna Sharma-Wilson, 17, and her brother, Sivan Wilson, 13, accompanied their mother, Mintra Sharma, to San Salvador, El Salvador, to participate in the first-ever Collaborative Education Program for the Americas. Ajna and Sivan were the only U.S. students at the conference.

Through the years, many students in Central American countries have existed under an educational system that provides little opportunity for them to learn and advance. Some of those students have turned to drugs, gangs and prostitution to eke out a living. To help change that, and to begin an era in which the police work together with

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Palos Verdes Estates residents, from left, Mintra Sharma, Sivan Wilson and Ajna Sharma-Wilson made a recent trip to El Salvador, where they worked with Latin American officials to build a better future for Central American students.

CONFERENCE

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students — rather than simply punishing them — more than 100 Latin American professors, political officials and law enforcement officers took part in the CEPA.

Says Mintra, "The idea was to get the police out there to [learn to] educate people rather than punish them."

"Education is a really big problem down there," Ajna says. "A lot of people drop out."

Though it was nerve-racking at first, Ajna and Sivan overcame cultural and language barriers to explain how schools and law enforcement officers can work together. "A lot of the people fear the police," Ajna says. "I don't think the police see the people as a resource; they see them as an obstacle."

"We were trying to convey to them the idea not to work against the people," she continues. "They are starting off fresh, and they don't know what to do with themselves."

Providing Input

Countries from Central America, such as Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador, as well as their northern neighbor, the United States, sent a number of representatives to offer suggestions about how to improve education in the region. Mintra, Ajna and Sivan, who were invited courtesy of Dr. Fred Rodriguez, one of Mintra's former professors, sat alongside some top-notch education and law enforcement officials to provide their own input.

Mintra was there to give suggestions about parenting. Though she had some trouble with the language, Mintra conveyed ideas about taking care of children. Too often, she says, Latin American social status takes center stage in life, while necessities such as education and parenting skills fall by the wayside. In countries where there are few rich and countless poor, this can spell disaster.

"Regardless of the status, parenting is the most valuable thing you can do," Mintra says. "You cannot parent alone; parenting has to be with the community. It begins at home."

"To me, it was surprising to see the lack of parenting," she says of

some parents who let their youngsters roam the streets. "Education begins right there with parenting."

Education, she told conference participants, must be available to all social classes so that not only the well-to-do end up with college degrees. Mintra explained that education can help people to better their lives. "That's going to be hard for those countries [to implement]," she says.

"There it's like a huge accomplishment just to graduate high school," says Sivan, who informed conference participants about the DARE program for keeping children off drugs and alcohol.

For her part, Ajna, who speaks Spanish, offered information about how U.S. schools organize children into a learning environment with specific classes and curricula. They had a lot of questions as to how our schools were set up," she says. "Just hearing that I actually go to my classes was a big deal."

Says Sivan, "We gave them an idea about what kids in the United States are like."

Some representatives, Ajna says, were not open to allowing teachers to form their own lesson plans. At least one official from Honduras told fellow participants that there is no way teachers can do their jobs without help from the government, for instance. "It kind of reminds me of Big Brother," Ajna says. "Most of the heads of state are basically dictators."

Coming Together

Though a dictatorial atmosphere and police concerns dominated the conference at first, Mintra says, such dialogue didn't last for long. Soon, police officers and teachers spoke together to resolve issues of violence. "You could see the dedication, the need, the want to [tackle] the real issues," she says.

Mintra is confident that Central American leaders returned to their homelands with new game plans for educating, not just punishing, students of all classes. "They're going to go back to their countries and work with this," she says.

Leaders in a country such as El Salvador, Ajna says, with rich culture and tradition, will find a way to develop a better education system. "It's a country of potential, it really is," she says. "It's a beautiful country."

Already workers are tearing up the roads and building a new infra-

structure in a country that had been racked by civil war. "It's like the place has been bombed, and they're just rebuilding it," Mintra says.

Perhaps she and her children, Mintra ponders, can be a small part of this rebuilding process. Those who participated in the conference, she says, have helped that process by giving a vision of peace to Central America. "The [officials] can go back into their own countries and say, 'This is what we came up with, this is what we can work with.'"

"We're really giving them our ideals, and they're incorporating them into their educational programs," Sivan says. "It's not just us giving to them, we're learning also."

Most encouraging, Ajna says, the people of Central America are willing to admit that they have problems and are open to input from other countries. "It's really important to bring fresh ideas to countries that are willing to receive them," she says. "They didn't want to rub dirt in each other's eyes. They wanted to see."