

Roots Collective creatively reaches Fresno area teens

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Some people might say Rick Virk is crazy.

He's hoping to reach kids who don't do well in school by having them come to something called "Saturday School" in Visalia this weekend?

C'mon.

But the fact is, Virk and the organization he's a part of, Roots Collective, have spent the past few years actually reaching kids by using a variety of untraditional methods.

To get to that, though, we have to start with Virk.

Now 33, he was once a troubled kid himself. He was kicked out of high school after problems with drugs and fighting. To go back to school to graduate, he had to go to counseling.

"I remember thinking if I was a counselor, I could do a better job," Virk says.

It took him a few years to finally get his head on straight, but once he did, he got a bachelor's degree from California State University, Fresno, in child development and a master's degree in marriage and family therapy.

He knew what he wanted to do -- reach teenagers.

He wasn't too keen on the traditional methods, though, so he and Fresno State classmates Andy Ginther and Kari Wilson started Roots Collective, an after-school counseling service that kids didn't really know was a counseling service.

Roots Collective has worked at schools in Fresno, Orosi and Cutler, and currently runs programs at Mt. Whitney and Golden West high schools in Visalia.

When Roots started, Kirk remembers thinking, "We need to approach this for the kids. Let's approach this from the youth culture. We actually ask the kids what they're into and what they're interested in."

So they have creative writing workshops led by poets. They teach kids to DJ and break dance. They get them to talk about their emotions by dissecting hip-hop lyrics. They give students T-shirts or hoodies when their grades improve.

And they organize events like this weekend's Saturday School, a workshop in Visalia with a rapper and DJ from Los Angeles, who will lead workshops and then perform a free concert.

"When I was 15 or 16," Virk says. "I wanted to go to shows, but I didn't have transportation, I didn't have money. So you know what? Let's bring the shows to the kids."

All this has brought something else to the kids too -- success.

"Out of all the kids we've worked with," Virk says, "we only had one student who didn't graduate high school. Most ... have gone on to college."

EVENT INFO

Saturday School with Bambu and DJ Phatrick, 1-4 p.m. Saturday, March 24 at 210 Cafe, 210 W. Center Ave., Visalia. Free. All ages.

Concert with 40 Watt Hype, Omar Aura, DJ Ren Rock, Climax Soul Control and more, 5-8 p.m. at Garden Street Plaza, Visalia. Free. All ages.