

Visalia, Orosi-area students find an outlet through music

Nearly 50 Visalia and Orosi-area students were asked recently what they saw as the most pressing situation in their neighborhoods.

The overwhelming response? Poverty.

The exercise on Saturday was part of a daylong workshop called Saturday School, led by musicians and social activists Bambu and DJ Phattrick. It was designed to help students understand how art as an outlet and community service can trump larger influences like gang violence and drugs.

"As cliché as it sounds, [kids] truly are our future," said Bambu, a Los Angeles-based rapper who works with a youth organization in Southern California. "The unfortunate thing with youth is that they feel people don't relate to them."

Students received a crash course in the music industry, a lesson in economics and were given a glimpse into the harsh prison system by Bambu, a former gang member who served time in prison for armed robbery before joining the Marine Corps.

But the outreach workshop was part of a larger initiative by the Roots Collective, a

nonprofit organization that provides after-school counseling in non-traditional ways.

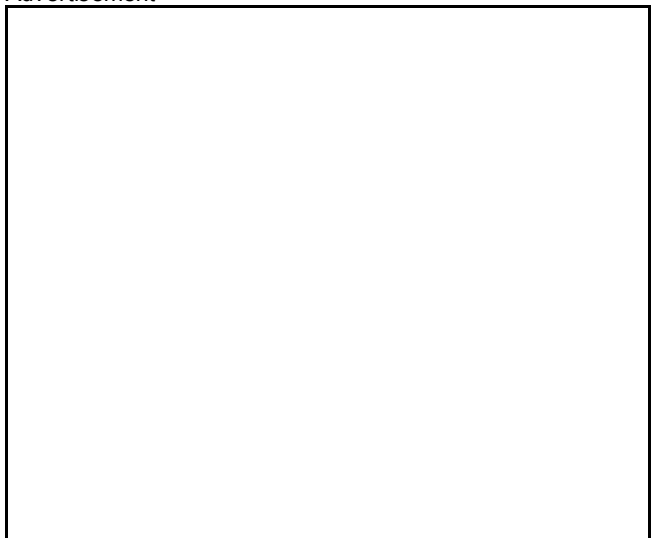
"There's still very much a negative stigma attached to the word 'counseling,'" said the program's co-founder, Rick Virk.

Virk, an alumnus of California State University, Fresno, said he often found himself in trouble as a student and wound up attending detention on Saturday, which at many public high schools is called Saturday School. So he decided to start a counseling service for at-risk teenagers in a way that he thought would be more effective.

Using a non-traditional approach, Virk teaches students creative writing, break dancing and how to deejay at schools in Orosi and Cutler and at Golden West and Mt. Whitney high schools in Visalia.

"We wanted to do something a little different than what was already being done," Virk said about the program, which began last year. "My big passion is music,

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specifically hip-hop music. But just any creative outlet for the kids to have is positive."

The organization is pioneering a support network to help teenagers — largely Latino and underserved — escape the suffering of poverty and violence. The service that is offered by the organization is one that straddles the line between mentorship and therapeutic counseling.

High schools provide counseling in varying degrees. But few provide music and art as an alternative to traditional one-on-one advising sessions.

For Manuel Gomez, 19, the program has helped him steer him away from drugs. Last year, the program even helped him stay on the path toward graduation at Orosi High School.

"In Orosi, there's not much to do except for being in the streets. So it's helped me out a lot," he said.

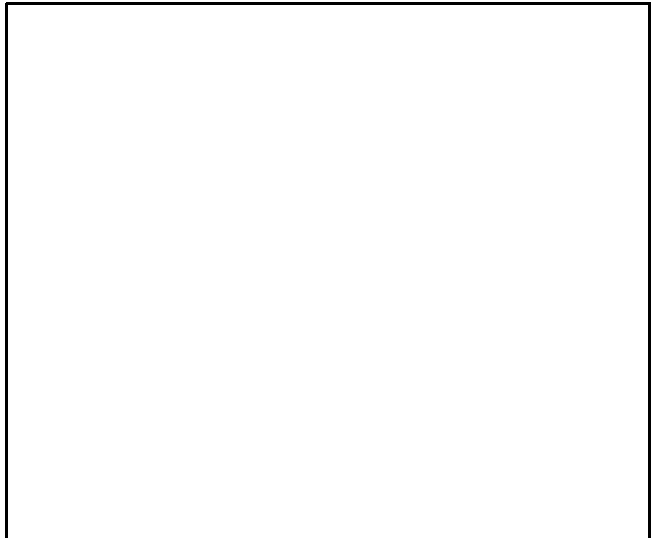
He added that even after he graduated, he has been able to call Virk and ask for his advice.

After the workshop, students were treated to a free concert at Garden Street Plaza, where Fresno-based band 40 Watt Hype performed along with several spoken-word artists. Bambu and DJ Phatrick headlined the concert.



DJ Phatrick unplugs his equipment after a motivational workshop for students called Saturday School. / BRIAN MAXEY

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