

49ers Help Save Center

Jul 27, 2007

By Tony Burchyns - Staff Writer

Morgan Hill - Former San Francisco 49ers athletes Jeff Garcia and Randy Kirk have joined others in a pledge drive that's raised about \$60,000 to save El Toro Youth Center, which was on the brink of closing in June.

The center's parent organization, Community Solutions, announced last month it would no longer be able to keep El Toro going along with the many other programs it administers. Concerned parents and community advocates then discovered Catholic Charities, a national non-profit provider of social services with offices in San Jose, was interested in supporting a youth and family-oriented program in South County. Catholic Charities runs similar programs in San Jose and wanted to establish a presence in the Morgan Hill and Gilroy area. The one problem, however, was that their funding for the fiscal year 2007-08 has already been fully committed.

So, an ad hoc committee of El Toro Youth Center supporters led by Morgan Hill Mayor Steve Tate struck a deal with Catholic Charities whereby if they could raise \$100,000, the organization would commit to administering it during the upcoming school year.

Tate said it wasn't hard to get the ball rolling.

"The community has really responded well," he said, "as it always does in times of need like this. El Toro gives the kids an alternative and gives them a lot of support, in terms of homework or if they have problems in their lives or in their families ... it's just a very positive thing in their lives."

For 20 years, the Crest Avenue center has provided after-school and summer programs for needy children and parents. Many low-income and single-parent families rely on El Toro Youth Center for childcare and academic support. The center also serves as a hub of information on other social services available to low-income as well as immigrant families.

Garcia paid a surprise visit to the Crest Avenue center in Morgan Hill on July 14 with his wife Carmella Garcia. After taking a tour and signing autographs for about a dozen children who were there, Garcia whipped out his checkbook and delivered a \$10,000 check.

"He is just a sweetheart," said Lori Escobar, El Toro Youth Center's director of 20 years. "He asked a lot of questions about the center, how many kids are served, whether they were local kids, what grades, what ages ... and he spent time talking to the kids and looking around at all the artwork they did. He and Carmella just became fans."

Kirk, a Morgan Hill native who still lives in the area, is looking for companies, foundations or individuals who will join Kirk's Kids Foundation in a "matching grant" program to benefit the center. If he can find four others who will promise to match up to \$5,000 in pledges, then he could raise up to \$25,000.

So far, Fry's Electronics has pledged \$20,000 to keep the center open as local businesses also show their support. Mobedshahi Family Foundation, Johnson Lumber ACE Hardware/Johnson Garden Center, Techcon Landscape Construction and South Valley Developers have pledged nearly \$20,000 in total. Several other people and businesses have made \$1,000 pledges, Tate said.

The Rotary Club of Morgan Hill, which has supported the youth center for many years, has pledged \$2,000 while holding out the possibility that they could do more once Catholic Charities is committed and has concrete plans in place.

"We are making fantastic progress but have a way to go," Tate said. "We welcome all pledges ... the sooner we receive pledges, the sooner we can get Catholic Charities on board."

Supporters of El Toro Youth Center are planning a fundraiser for Saturday, Aug. 25 at the Friendly Inn and Galvan Park on Crest Avenue, just down the street from the El Toro Youth Center. Tours of the center will be given and there will be food, drink and entertainment along with opportunities to make pledges for the program. Organizers are still seeking volunteers.

"We are determined that this great program must continue in Morgan Hill," Tate said, "and we're well on the way to making it happen. We appreciate the community's past support of El Toro Youth Center and will deeply appreciate continued support in this current time of need."

If you're interested in getting involved in the pledge drive, call Morgan Hill Mayor Steve Tate at (408) 621-7377.

