



Photographs courtesy of Making the Right Connections

MAKING THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS

- Question: Over summer vacation would you rather:
- a) Stare at the television all day
 - b) Hang out on a street corner
 - c) Fall in with a neighborhood gang
 - d) Hike the trails of a hidden valley

For hundreds of South Los Angeles youth, the answer is a resounding “D”. These are kids who live in tough neighborhoods, where the chance to go on a field trip is a rare and delightful treat. For those who enroll in Making the Right Connections however, discovering Los Angeles’ magnificent natural landscape is just the beginning.

At MTRC’s summer program, now in its 21ST year, kids are treated to visits from exotic Hawaiian dancers, strong and daring firefighters, mysterious magicians, powerful karate masters and of course, the ever-impressive basketball star. They learn yoga and drumming, and go bowling and roller skating. They visit museums, water parks and amusement parks. They also manage to squeeze in some book time, with classes in reading and math, and spend a good bit of time talking about the decision-making tools they’ll need for a successful future.

“They’re here for fun – and don’t even realize they’re learning!” said Richard Montielh, a site coordinator for the summer camp. “That’s what makes it so great.”

Making the Right Connections operates at five parochial inner-city schools in L.A. County, serving more than 1,000 children from first through eighth grades, with sister programs launched by founder and director Daniel Drass operating in Stockton, Milwaukee and Chicago.

The program focuses on children who have relatives who are involved in gangs, or who live in areas that put them at risk of falling victim to gang influence. By emphasizing the connections between “the four pillars” of family, school, church and community, the program aims to keep children out of harm’s way. “Learning to make these connections,” noted Drass, “is essential to the well-being of our children, both now and in the future.”

To undergird these values, MTRC mixes at least five “teacher-directed” lessons dealing with both awareness and prevention of gang and drug involvement, into a delightful mix of social, cultural and recreational activities that keep these kids coming back year after year. By the end of summer 2008, 96 percent of the students rated the summer program as “very good” or “excellent”, and 86 percent affirmed that the MTRC program had definitively helped them make the choice to stay away from the gangs and drugs in their paths.

At St. Odilia Elementary School, one of the program hosts, a dozen participants from past years gathered on a warm spring afternoon to share their favorite memories. The best part of the program, they all agreed, is the weekly field trip. Some mentioned going to a water park, especially on really hot days. A good handful favored the beach. But the one “super-fun” place on which everyone agreed, was the local nature preserve.

“We walked all around the place and just saw so many different kinds of plants,” said Noemi, a 13-year-old eighth-grader, recalling what she dubbed “the perfect day” from her MTRC experience last summer. “We even got lost for a while, but then we found our way back.”

For many of the children who attend the Making the Right Connections summer program, the freedom to wander away from the group and get “lost” for a few minutes is a rare luxury. Within three days of the gathering, the neighborhood surrounding the school was hit by two homicides, three aggravated assaults and more than a dozen violent robberies.

“This is an urban neighborhood that is ridiculously violent,” said Montielh, who is also vice-principal at St. Odilia. “These kids can’t go to their community parks. Some can’t even play outside at all. It’s the kind of thing kids love to do, but many of our kids just can’t. Here at MTRC, it’s special to do the things that ‘regular’ kids take for granted.”

Helping kids do regular things was Drass’ aim when he created Making the Right Connections. The students, nearly all of whom qualify for their school’s free lunch programs, pay between \$50 and \$60 for the six-week program – not a small sum for most of their families. The actual cost per child is many more times that, Drass said, so the program relies on grants and donations to make up the difference. The fundraising effort is certainly worthwhile; without MTRC, most



of these children would have no other alternative for safe and well-organized summer activities.

Making the Right Connections is more, however, than a safe haven for youngsters; it is also a source of employment and job training. In 2008, all of the program's 46 teacher assistants were between the ages of 14 and 19, and most came from the neighborhood surrounding the school. Although the program struggles to secure funding for its young workers—there were funds to pay only eight of the TA's last year—even those who volunteer find great value in the workplace skills they attain. The average teacher's assistant volunteers for six years. Most are former MTRC participants and many go on to careers in education.

Diana is one such example. She first enrolled at Making the Right Connections as an eighth-grader, and volunteered with the program in high school. Today, Diana is an elementary school teacher herself, joyfully imparting the lessons of social studies and science to sixth, seventh, and eighth-graders. Each summer she returns to work at MTRC. "I got my love of teaching from this program," she said. "They planted the seed, and it is my great honor to give back."