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Bagwell helps teens realize ideas, dreams

Teen Leader's Club is a place for youth to build confidence

By **THAIS SHUBIN**
For The Salinas Californian

More than anything, Darlene Bagwell wants the youths in her Teen Leader's Club to have a place where their ideas can come to life.

Born and raised in Soledad, Bagwell has been the South County YMCA Leader's Club adviser for almost three years.

The mission of the club is to "prepare the young adult for life after high school by helping them to develop skills in community service and self development." The club meets every first and third Wednesday of the month at the South County YMCA in Soledad.

"My goal is to see the kids' ideas actually happen," Bagwell said. "I tell them it's their show. I'm only here to help."

She began volunteering with the club when her daughter, Malissa, 19, became involved in it. Eventually, Bagwell became the club's adviser, and now her second daughter, Savannah, is the Teen Leader's Club's youngest member at 13. The entire family usually comes out to help with events, including her husband of 20 years, Ed.

"Our biggest event is called the "Music Mayhem." It's basically an all-day concert featuring punk rock bands," she said. "We have a lot of teens with piercings and crazy hairdos, but they're all pretty much straight edge (meaning they don't use drugs or alcohol). It's a safe place for them to hang out and hopefully learn something in the process."

RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Darlene Bagwell is a youth leader for the 'Young Leaders Club' at the South County YMCA.

DARLENE BAGWELL

- **AGE:** 39
- **YOUTH INVOLVEMENT:** Teen Leader's Club adviser at the South County YMCA.
- **WORK:** Receptionist at Monterey County Assessor's Office.
- **EDUCATION:** Gonzales High School graduate.
- **PERSONAL:** Lives in Soledad with husband, Ed; and two daughters, Malissa, 19, and Savannah, 13.
- **INFORMATION:** South County YMCA, 560 N. Walker Drive, Soledad. Phone: 678-1239.

The club has an open door policy. Everyone is welcome.

"We have newcomers all the time," Bagwell said. "Before you know it, everyone gets a hug when they come in. In the time I've been involved, I've definitely seen the impact it's had on their self-esteem and confidence."

One goal the Leader's Club hopes to meet this year is a ski trip to Lake Tahoe. In previous years, the trip has been a big success.

"Some of these kids have never even seen the snow," Bagwell said. "It's exciting to see them experiencing new things."

For the holiday season, the club is collecting "gently used" or new blankets and jackets for the Salvation Army.

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Youth pastors committed to task

By **JOLI SPENCIER**
For The Salinas Californian

Estevan and Maria Rojas say their roles as youth pastors at El Shaddai Church in Greenfield aren't easy.

The young people the couple work with bring them tough problems, from gang affiliation to drug addiction to teen pregnancy, the couple say.

Estevan said the youth ministry can be very trying. "Sometimes it is overwhelming," he said.

But he said he's committed to trying to help, remembering the turmoil of his own teenage years.

"I know what they go through," Estevan said. Once an at-risk youth himself, he said, he wants to impart a message that will lift the spirits of young people. "When you are younger it is harder," he said.

In a community with many problems, the needs are great.

"Our kids are being bombarded with things that are happening in life," said the Rev. Andrew Salinas, pastor at El Shaddai.

Estevan Rojas, who returned in 2005 from a tour of duty in the Marine Corps at Camp Pendleton near San Diego, said problems have worsened since he left south county in 2001. He sees an increase Gothic and punk rock cultures.

RICHARD GREEN/THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN

Estevan and Maria Rojas.

"It is misleading the youth," he said. "They are trying to fit with people and feel accepted. There is a lot of temptation out there and I am just trying to guide them in the right direction."

When Rojas joined the Marines, he had just turned 18, was a year behind at school and was not on the right track, he said. But he said his life changed when he accepted the Lord.

"I felt I had to give back to the Lord," he said. That change led him to become involved in the youth ministry.

Rojas said he has empathy for teens' pain and confusion. "If they come from a gang-banging or drug-addiction background, I can work them on that situation," he said. During football season, Rojas said he witnesses the numbers of young people who attend the functions decrease by 50 percent. But in spite of the appearances, Rojas is not discouraged. "We know it is not in vain," he said. "God has everything under control."

Maria Rojas, who works with the girls, shares Estevan's dedication to ministering to young people. She started by assisting the youth leader at the church, and there she found her calling.

"I feel like this is what I need to do," she said.

Maria said she also sees numerous temptations threatening the future of many south county young people. Girls are starting to have sex at a very early age, often as young as 11, she said. As a result, she said, one of the biggest problems in the area is teen pregnancy.

When a young girl is facing such tough life decisions, the youth pastors don't handle it alone. "We deal with what God says first," she said. At those times, the pastor's wife and others may be called on for additional support.

ESTEVAN AND MARIA ROJAS

- **AGES:** Both are 25.
- **YOUTH INVOLVEMENT:** Youth pastors at El Shaddai Church in Greenfield
- **WORK:** Estevan works as a janitor for the city of Greenfield and Maria works at CTB/McGraw Hill in Salinas, which is closing. She has been told she will be laid off effective Jan. 14.
- **EDUCATION:** Both are graduates of King City High School in King City
- **PERSONAL:** Estevan and Maria Rojas, a married couple, live in Greenfield with their two children, Emily Marie, 3, and newborn, Steven Emmanuel.

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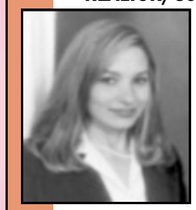

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Born and raised in London, England, Lucy worked as an "Estate Agent". (English term for Realtor), when she was 18 years old. She still loves the world of property, serving as the Managing Agent for Legacy Real Estate, based in Soledad, but servicing the entire Salinas Valley. Lucy is vested in the South County community in which she lives and, as a real estate professional, believes in giving back to her community each and every day. She is Vice President of the Soledad-Mission Chamber of Commerce, San Vicente School site council board member, Salvation Army fundraiser, local newspaper columnist and, in her spare time, wife to Mike and mother to Francoise. For all your real estate needs, call Lucy at 229-0663.
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