

APAL leads way for kids

By **Marta Yamamoto**
CORRESPONDENT

Article Launched: 09/21/2007 03:11:41 AM PDT

In the spring of 1997, the Albany community and Police Chief Larry Murdo recognized the need to offer more activities to Albany's youth and strengthen their relationship with the city's police. So was born the Albany Police Activities League, which is marking its 10th year of helping keep Albany kids out of trouble and on the right path.

"We knew that prime crime time was from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m., when kids are out of school and parents aren't home yet," said program manager and treasurer Peggy McQuaid, who helped form the Albany Police Activities League (APAL) as a member of the first board of directors. "They're looking for something to do. If there's not something positive, they'll go to something negative."

The board determined that middle school students would benefit most from organized activities. By 1999, APAL had 100 members, and has maintained that number to the present.

"One of the greatest benefits we get is in terms of the relationship between the police and the youth," said Albany Police Chief and APAL Executive Director Mike McQuiston. "We have the ability to interact in a non-confrontational setting, to mentor and to be role models."

Today there are three primary programs: wrestling, **Kurukula**® for girls, and Youth Director's Council, serving youths from third grade through high school. "We've tried to look for a youth need that wasn't being met, filling the void with some activity," McQuiston said. "For the past five years, we've focused on doing four or five things really well, giving them all our attention."

Tyrone Rose, who coaches the co-ed middle school wrestling program, sees the sport as an ideal activity for this age group. "Wrestling is unique in that there's no particular weight, size, height or body type. We accept everyone. No one gets cut, everyone makes the team, and everyone gets a uniform," Rose said.

The program is geared toward helping kids gain self-confidence and feel good about what they're doing, from practices to tournaments. "In competition, some kids may not win right away. But if they stick with it, they'll find they have success," Rose said. "They get a tremendous amount of self-esteem when they do well or just improve."

In 2004, APAL added co-ed Crocodile Wrestling, for third- through fifth-graders. Assistant Coach Caleb Kahn seconds Rose's praise for the sport. "It's a good outlet for kids, and they love it. They can have their horseplay and not get in trouble for it," Kahn said. "They get a lot out of it, and then go home tired and satisfied."

Sarah Robson's son began Crocodile Wrestling in the second grade. "Being able to wrestle at a young age has really helped him learn self-control -- both physical and mental," Robson said.

Alice Ely, mother of wrestling sons Frank, 15, Bob, 12, and Jack, 9, and wife of Crocodile

Coach Jon Ely, has witnessed several benefits. "Unlike team sports, when the kids are out there wrestling, it's one-on-one. They dig down deep inside and see what they're made of," Ely said.

After teaching co-ed classes in martial arts, Dara Connolly wanted to do a separate class just for girls. "I realized they needed a class to talk about the things they're too afraid to bring up in a co-ed class," Connolly said.

That class was **Kurukula**, named after the Tibetan goddess of empowerment. "My whole goal was to make the class a positive experience where they develop self-confidence, learn to feel good about themselves, and make good choices to avoid unsafe situations," Connolly said.

Goals are reached through empowerment, life skills and self-defense. Life skills sessions are currently focused on assertiveness, Internet safety and cyber-bullies. Lessons are taught in a safe, comfortable environment, through music, creative games and role-play.

Connolly's messages are getting through, supported by a pre-test that's repeated at the course's end. "There's a 93 percent success rate of what they're learning about how to handle situations," she said. This success has Connolly offering a pre-teen class for girls 9 and up. "They're starting younger and younger to deal with more and more important issues," Connolly said.

Jeanne Killian feels positive about 12-year-old daughter Liz's experience. " **Kurukula** has helped Liz with her self-esteem and relationships with her peers. It has been an excellent way for her to learn about personal safety and girl issues," Killian said.

After taking both **Kurukula** levels, Ceyda Hicks, 12, knows empowerment first-hand. " **Kurukula** teaches me to be safe. I can walk home safely because I know how to defend myself," Hicks said. She also gives **Kurukula** credit for teaching her how to look behind a gentlemanly demeanor for a possible predator.

At the high school level, APAL sponsors the Youth Director's Council, a leadership and service organization. Under the school resource police officer, members participate in the coastal cleanup, visit senior residences, and raise money for APAL at the Solano Stroll and Fourth of July celebrations.

Because of its size, it's difficult for officers to staff activities themselves, but they interact whenever they can. "Officers drop by practices; at tournaments they come to help, watch and encourage the kids," Ely said.

Everyone comes together at the yearly awards dinner to recognize the kids who have participated in the programs. "Everyone gets a certificate, and the wrestlers all get medals; the whole family comes," McQuaid said.

"Many of the police officers are there," Robson said. "We get to know them on a personal level, and the children see the police really care about the young people of our community."

APAL subsists with many hands feeding the pot -- Albany city funds, generous PAL parent donations, membership and program fees, Solano Stroll and Fourth of July sales, and

recently, substantial grants from the Bay Area Sports Hall of Fame. Chief McQuiston hopes to build on this funding in order to assign an officer to run APAL full time.

"We want to keep building the program, and to reach out to as many kids as we can that need it and want it," McQuiston said. "It's remarkable and rewarding to see how positively kids can be affected by being involved. The benefit they derive from getting a sense of self-worth and self-confidence is huge. You can't put a price tag on that."

E-mail comments on this story to ccjournal@bayareanewsgroup.com

APAL

WHAT: Albany Police Activities League

WHERE: 1000 San Pablo Ave., Albany

CONTACTS: For **Kurukula**, visit www.kurukula.org