Effort grows to help Anaheim kids

Adults also benefiting from ACT Anaheim programs targeted at city’s neediest neighborhoods.

By THERESA WALKER
STAFF WRITER

The third year appears to be even more of a charm for ACT Anaheim, the successful multimillion-dollar philanthropy aimed at the city’s neediest children.

Accelerate Change Together for Anaheim, the effort’s formal name, is humming along with almost twice the $8 million in seed money that was pledged by initial donors Disneyland Resort, the Angels and the Ducks.

More encouraging to those overseeing the outreach is the broad-based support and interaction among nonprofits and businesses in Anaheim necessary to sustain the outreach into the future.

“The results have been so promising and so far exceeding what anyone thought could be accomplished,” said Shelley Hoss, president of Orange County Community Foundation, managing partner for ACT.
ANAHEIM: Job training in medicine, construction also supported

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Anaheim. “This is not the swan song for ACT.”

The collective effort has served at least 8,000 young people through enhanced social and educational programs and intervention efforts, according to the foundation’s analysis.

An additional 3,000 adults have also benefited from parent education, domestic violence counseling and other programs.

Going into its third year, ACT Anaheim has awarded $5 million in grants to address the alarming findings in a 2012 city-financed study on its young people. Orange County’s largest city was found to be seriously lacking in programs available to at-risk youth as crime and gang activity in their neighborhoods grew.

That report galvanized the owners of Disneyland, the Angels and the Ducks to join together for the first time on a single project targeting “priority” neighborhoods.

More donors and participants have since joined, including these third-year funders: $200,000 from St. Joseph Health, St. Jude Medical Center; $30,000 from Anaheim Mayor Tom Tait; $80,000 from Working To Give LLC.

This year, 10 nonprofits will share $5.5 million in grants.

All along, Hoss said, the intention has been to build an integrated network of organizations, businesses and individuals to throw their collective weight behind ACT Anaheim.

Even two local breweries, Backstreet Brewery and Golden Road Brewery, played a part by donating a portion of proceeds from sales of a new Baltic beer introduced at a 2016 Opening Day pre-game baseball party.

“The huge win has been the reach that we have been able to achieve,” she said. “One of the biggest glaring findings from the assessment survey was the dearth of programs in particular geographic areas where they are most needed.”

Not only were programs lacking for children growing up in crowded conditions in the city’s poorest neighborhoods — and in models and temporary shelters — but also the means to get more of them to havens like the Boys & Girls Clubs of Anaheim.

The ACT money has helped the clubs expand van pick-up service to bring children to and from the clubs and continue underwriting programs in conjunction with other nonprofits, said John Machiavenna, executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Anaheim.

Since its first year of funding in 2014, ACT Anaheim has steered $425,000 in grants to the Boys & Girls Clubs, which operates two full-scale locations and a third satellite just for teens. This year’s $250,000 award will help double to 200 the number of children the clubs’ staff can transport, said Machiavenna, speaking from the clubs’ newly relocated main site at Manzanita Park, an area notorious for gang activity but in the heart of a long-undererved community.

“Because it’s a very tough neighborhood, a lot of nonprofits didn’t want to come here,” Machiavenna said. “They were fearful of what happens at night in this park.”

With 80 kids signed up already, the new club is nearly at its 140-member capacity. Most of the children served by the Anaheim clubs can’t afford the $80 annual membership fee, Machiavenna added, illustrating the need that the ACT Anaheim grants and collaboration with other groups has helped meet.

“If we don’t collaborate with other organizations,” she said, “that money is not going to be used to its optimal efficiency.”

Where the Boys & Girls Clubs have been a long-serving presence in Anaheim, the ACT Anaheim philanthropy has played a big role in assisting a Santa Ana-based organization for young adults establish a presence in Anaheim.

Taller San Jose Hope Builders began bringing its construction and medical career programs to Anaheim last fall, fully opening a location at Harbor Boulevard and Lincoln Avenues in March.

Taller (pronounced ‘tie-YAIR,’ Spanish for workshop) offers short-term intensive education and work training programs — along with a $300 weekly stipend — to impoverished young people 18 to 28, whose lives typically have been circumscripted by violence, substance abuse and parenting at a young age.

Taller had been looking to expand to Anaheim after the 2012 unrest in the city over a number of police shootings in largely working-class, Latino neighborhoods as law enforcement focused on crime crackdown on gang activity.

The investment by ACT Anaheim — totaling $500,000 in three grant awards — added to Taller’s fundraising for the new location, but also lent credibility to a newcomer in the city, said Shawn Smith, executive director.

“It is a model that is expanding outside of Santa Ana,” said Acosta, who was initially trained at the Santa Ana location in 2012. “They went through the whole process of building confidence that we would bring something to the community really needed.”

Young people from Anaheim were trained at the Santa Ana location in the past, but often that involved a 90-minute bus ride, Smith said.

“That could be a big obstacle. We know that in order to reach those young people, we needed to be where they were,” she added, observing that the Anaheim site can serve up to 800 trainees, as its Santa Ana counterpart does, and is closer for young people in other north Orange County communities and elsewhere.

Grisselle Acosta, a native of a violence-prone neighborhood in Puerto Rico, was living with her sister in Corona when she began taking clinical medical assisting classes at Taller’s Anaheim location in April.

Acosta, who was living in Anaheim with husband Ralph Acosta, 20, recently discharged from the Marine Corps and enrolled in Taller’s construction classes in Santa Ana.

“It’s like I’m almost a new person,” said Acosta, who held low-paying temporary jobs in retail before attending Taller full time. “I started thinking about new goals. She expects to finish her training in September, land a job as a medical assistant and keep studying to become a registered nurse.

Acosta, who was willing to travel to Santa Ana when she looked into Taller’s programs, expressed gratitude for ACT Anaheim’s support for a closer location.

“I really thank them so much.”

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