Mentoring Youth in Eastern Humboldt

Jackeline Pedroza
jp313@humboldt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/humboldtgeographic

Part of the Environmental Studies Commons, and the Spatial Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/humboldtgeographic/vol2/iss1/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Humboldt Geographic by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.
A 40-mile drive east from HSU takes you to what appears to be paradise: eastern Humboldt County. Where lush green forests encompass a vast landscape. Where the Trinity River’s tranquil, chilly waters provide a constant lifestream. And where tourists trickle into Willow Creek, renowned for its Bigfoot sightings, for the inland summer heat as an antidote to cool coastline.

Eastern Humboldt attracted the *Los Angeles Times* in 2017 and the *New York Times* a year later. Neither paper remarked on the region’s natural beauty, instead reporting on a youth suicide epidemic and a plethora of other acute social ills hidden behind this corner of the redwood curtain.

A troubled paradise, especially for its youth. What are the roots of such troubles?

Last fall, amid the pandemic, I sojourned to eastern Humboldt to speak with members of Dream Quest, a youth-serving organization, to seek some answers. Our conversations centered on barriers local youth confront in attaining education and finding regional career pathways. Some recurring challenges identified by Dream Quest youth mentors were the unavailability of reliable transportation, limited employment opportunities, and economic hardships.

“Transportation is absolutely huge,” according to one transitional youth mentor at Dream Quest. “Let’s say you’re a youth service provider in Eureka and you have a kid who needs a driver’s license. No big deal, you make an appointment and you’re able to take them to...”
the DMV next week. Here [in eastern Humboldt], it’s a three- or four-hour commitment just to get to and back from the DMV. A half a day to run a simple errand.”

Such challenges may not sound overwhelming to coastal Humboldtians, but they can be decisive in the success or failure for eastern Humboldt’s rural youth, a cohort commonly experiencing isolation. “The kids here don’t see as much as kids in other places,” said Trish Oakes, Dream Quest’s executive director.

Reports such as those appearing in the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times add to the determination of community members in eastern Humboldt to provide critical services for the vulnerable youth nestled in their beautiful yet isolated communities. The growth in the number of youth served by Dream Quest speaks volumes. “We went from serving 20 kids a year to serving 250 kids a year,” Oakes reported. “And we went from being open 12 hours a week to 70 hours a week.”

How does Dream Quest address obstacles confronting transitional youth? According to its mission statement, Dream Quest aims to “provide youth with vocational and creative opportunities to imagine and build their dreams.” Dream Quest additionally helps transitional youth by fostering community through outreach. For example, as highlighted in the organization’s website, “Dream Quest participates in a big way at Bigfoot Daze,” an annual festival in Willow Creek where youth ride in parade floats and perform their own musical productions. Through such work, introverted transitional youth gain the courage to speak publicly. “I’ve seen kids go from being so shy that they can’t have a conversation or make eye contact with somebody to being on stage and singing in front of 60 to 80 people,” said another Dream Quest youth mentor.

Dream Quest, along with similar organizations, provide critically needed services for geographically and socially marginalized youth. However, it is important to acknowledge that youth-serving work must not stop at programs like these. The significance of investing in youth needs to be echoed to local and state governments to bring about long-lasting, positive change. Local and state governments bear the responsibility of ensuring that young people have opportunities to succeed in the most rural of landscapes, including the small settlements of eastern Humboldt County.