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Mentoring Youth in Eastern Humboldt

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the course requirements to transfer to a University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU). Additionally, the California Public Utilities Commission acknowledges that all of eastern Humboldt remains unconnected to wireline broadband services. Residents often depend on expensive and limited satellite-mobile internet providers.

Marginalization exacerbates the mental health crisis among American youth due to a lack of access to broadband, transportation, economic opportunities, recreation centers, and mental health support services. In 2015, the Yurok Tribe declared a state of emergency due to a cluster of suicides among young adults residing in Weitchpec. From 2015 to 2017, as reported by Indian Country Today, the suicide rate on the Yurok reservation rose to nearly 14 times the national average.

Dream Quest

Mentoring Youth in Eastern Humboldt

Jackeline Pedroza

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

Across the nation, the experiences shaping children's lives are diverse. While many children can receive resources and opportunities to learn and develop the skills needed to succeed, far too many families living in marginalized communities struggle to provide the childhoods that all kids deserve. Eastern Humboldt does not have the resources, services, and infrastructure for every young resident to grow up healthy and succeed. In addition, the analysis of aggregate data and secondary sources point to a community more vulnerable than others to societal changes, such as adverse experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Footloose: Breakdancing is among the long list of youth activities offered at Dream Quest (photo courtesy of Trish Oakes).

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



Teenage Dreams: Dream Quest's Teen Center is a refuge from the isolation experienced by many young eastern Humboldtians (photo courtesy of Trish Oakes).

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.

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