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Omega Boys Club Offers a Cure for Violence

By Kristin A. Smith

Teenagers from around the Bay Area come to Dogpatch-based Omega Boys Club to get a second chance at an education. But while the nonprofit is housed in a San Francisco Unified School District building, Omega is not your typical school. "What happens in here does not look like what happens in another classroom," said Deborah Estell, Omega's Coordinator. "What happens here is magic."

The magic to which Estell refers consists of the Omega Leadership Academy, a comprehensive program that includes a non-violence curriculum, academic courses and a college scholarship fund.

Founded by Joseph E. Marshall, a former middle school administrator with a doctorate in psychology, and Jack Jacqua, a school counselor, the Omega Boys Club's goal is to keep kids "alive and free from violence" so they can "build positive lives and move into contributing roles in society." Marshal and Jacqua believe that whether students are directly involved in gangs or just surrounded by disruptive behavior, urban violence prevents them from reaching their academic potential. According to Jack Soares, Omega's Communications Director, Omega "aims to give back to kids the education they lost to violence."

Contrary to its name, Omega serves both boys and girl. Students take evening courses in math and literature, which are designed to help them graduate from high school or obtain their General Education Degree (GED). Omega serves 300 students annually; in its two decade-plus years of operation, every student who's completed the Leadership Academy has received their diploma or GED.

The Omega Scholarship Fund provides financial support to enable low-income students to attend college. "Many of these kids are the first in their families to graduate from high school, let alone college," said Soares.

Amanda Jones, 20, is one of the students who benefited from an Omega scholarship. Growing up in West Oakland, Jones used drugs, engaged in violent behavior, and was surrounded by friends that she said "were going nowhere." Jones was smart but didn't see college in her future. "I just didn't have any confidence in myself to succeed," she said. "I figured I was doomed." But she wasn't; Jones just finished her first year at Tennessee State University with a 3.2 grade point average.

In addition to academic courses, Academy students participate in "family meetings" that provide a safe space for them to grapple with complex personal issues. Students are taught how to become civic leaders, and provided with ways to incorporate non-violence into their daily lives. Rather than seeing violence as a social problem, Omega treats the problem as a virus that overtakes an individual. "We think of violence as a disease," said Soares. "And there's a cure for that disease." Omega's cure for violence is the Alive and Free Violence Prevention program, which is taught both within the Academy and through training workshops designed for educators.

Participants learn the risk factors for contracting the violence virus, and ways to purge the infection from their system. The program teaches new ways of living based on respect and authentic relationships. In its 21-year history only one student who's completed the program has died of violence, and in that case it was self-inflicted. "It works," said Soares.

If Omega Boys Club had a poster child, it'd be Andre Aikins. Aikins grew up in Oakland and found himself entangled in the world of gangs and violence. His tough attitude and disinterest in education got him kicked out of numerous public schools. But his life changed when he met Marshall at a high school assembly. Aikins was skeptical but intrigued by Marshall's refrain of "If you knew what I knew, you wouldn't do what you do." Aikins confronted Marshall after the assembly and demanded to know what he meant. Marshall said he'd show him, and brought Aikins to Omega.

Shortly after, Aikins became a regular participant, and with the help of the Academy, he received his GED and attended college on an Omega scholarship. After graduating with a degree in Math Education, Aikins got a job teaching at a middle school that'd kicked him out years before, and eventually became the school's vice principal. Today Aikins is Omega's Operations Manager.

Aikins wears crisp, white sneakers and thin-framed glasses. His tattoos peek out of a tucked-in polo shirt. "I wouldn't have the life I have now if it weren't for Omega," he said. "I had to give back in the way it was given to me." Aikins isn't the only one to stay loyal to the program; two other former students also serve on the board.

What began as a refuge for Bay Area youth has turned into a worldwide network. Omega students, who without the nonprofit's intervention might never have left Northern California, are now scattered across the country, attending college and spreading the message of non-violence. Later this year, Marshall will be heading to South Africa to hand-deliver his prescription to that country's ailing school districts.

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