

Parkway Trust takes summer program to Firebaugh

River Parkway takes its summer program to 'bored' children in Firebaugh.

By Marc Benjamin

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FIREBAUGH -- Summer camp is usually too costly for many children in this western Fresno County city, so they have to miss out on the hallowed traditions of canoeing and singing camp songs.

But this year, summer camp came to the kids of Firebaugh.

Instead of being "home, bored," Abigail Andrade, 12, and other Firebaugh kids are spending this week playing camp games, learning about Native Americans who populated the area and swimming in the San Joaquin River, which flows next to town.

"I didn't know we could swim in the river," she said. "We learned about being safe."

The San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust offers summer camp each year on the San Joaquin River near Fresno. This year, with \$20,000 in private grants, the trust -- a nonprofit dedicated to educating the public about the San Joaquin River -- added two free weeklong camp sessions in Firebaugh for 100 kids in grades one through eight. The camp also benefits other Firebaugh students: High schoolers who volunteer can claim public service hours, and college students are paid counselors.

"We picked up the program from Fresno, packed it up and took it down to Firebaugh," said Sarah Parkes, the camp's program director.

Campers were recruited through local churches and schools. They ended up with a waiting list for both sessions, she said.

Juan Echeverria, a West Hills College student who is working as a counselor, said he didn't have a camp like this when he was growing up in Firebaugh.

"These are all good kids; they just need something to do," said Echeverria, 19.

Andrea Salcedo, 21, a radiology student in San Luis Obispo, said she prefers having a summer job in Firebaugh than traveling to Fresno for work. But the best part, she said, is that it doesn't feel like work.

"I like playing with kids and running around," she said. "When they are having fun, I'm having fun."

Volunteer Daniela Reyes, 14, is racking up public service hours for high school, which are not always easy to come by in Firebaugh.

"I know I'm going to be needing those hours, and this is an easy and fun way to do it," Daniela said.

Firebaugh city officials welcomed the camp and gave the trust permission to use its park and community center.

City Manager Laura Weyant, who was raised near Firebaugh by field worker parents, never attended summer camp growing up. She was looking for a way to help the city's children over the summer when trust officials came to the City Council this year with their plan.

"This was right on the path of what we were hoping for," she said.

Weyant said many Firebaugh children are raised by working parents who leave them at home during the summer and tell them not to open the door for anyone.

Angelica Luquin, 9, said her summer days normally consist of watching television, eating lunch and then taking a nap.

"I'm glad I'm not home because I get bored, and here there's a lot more activities," she said.

Even though the San Joaquin River looks temptingly cool on hot summer days, Angelica and many of the other children say they don't play there.

"I like going in the river. I've never been in the river (before camp)," she said. "They teach us how to swim and when there's danger."

Weyant said she is happy that the river is being used for canoeing, swimming and floating because of children such as Angelica.

"We (city residents) never use the river recreationally," she said. "Seeing the children in there is almost odd, but it's a good thing."