

## Española, Los Alamos youth take positive steps at JUNTOS

June 22, 2007

JUNTOS, the group of high school students from Los Alamos and Española, met June 21 to continue their goal of finding a common thread with which to sew the two communities together.

The gathering opened with a quote from “A Course in Miracles”: “The most sacred place on earth is where an ancient hatred becomes a present love,” an appropriate way to set the scene for the day’s goals.

The meetings, organized by JUNTOS-concept creator Lori Heindahl Gibson, began in May for both the youth and adults. The youth focus on planning activities to increase awareness, while the adults discuss funding and logistics at separate meetings.

Thursday’s agenda, led by Los Alamos High School senior Jeremy Kasik, called for the group to set ground rules to guide discussion, acknowledging that in a setting designed to address social tensions, words can become heated. The group decided on a number of rules, including maintaining a respectful nature of open-mindedness and support.

The kids are easy around each other and appear as regular schoolmates, unaffected by the “Sharks vs. Jets” environment in which they have grown up.

Thursday’s meeting served as the second gathering of youth from Los Alamos and Española with the goal of alleviating the tension between the two communities. Adult leaders were in attendance, as well. Twenty-two people were present at the meeting, with representation from both towns.

The group was divided into three smaller groups in which the members were able to discuss in greater depth the problems that separate the towns. While the basic stereotyping issues have been pointed out, the small groups gave the youth more opportunity to voice their opinions and views.

“It seems like there’s more hate from Los Alamos toward Española than from Española to Los Alamos,” LAHS student Sean Erickson said. “We need to calm people down. It’s not that bad down there (in Española).”

“It’s not as hardcore as it used to be,” Española Valley High School student Nathana Bird said.

YMCA Child Care Director Ben Sandoval shared with the youth a childhood story about growing up in the valley and visiting Los Alamos.

“When our TG & Y store closed down, we had to come up to Los Alamos. My parents would tell me, ‘We’re only going to TG & Y and then straight back,’” he recalled. “They’d say, ‘They’ll make fun of us; we’re brown.’”

Sandoval went on to explain that while Española’s environment has changed over the years, the negative perceptions of the town have not.

“The money is there; the education is there,” he said. “The motivation isn’t.”

The JUNTOS members discussed the media’s role in public perception and Jeremy Kasik read a draft he’d devised of a letter to the editors of the Monitor and the Rio Grande Sun, expressing the JUNTOS philosophy and asking that the media try not to participate in perpetuating the stereotyping in the newspapers.

Although still in the early stages, the group activities and events are gradually coming to fruition. The members further discussed their idea to paint murals in each town representing their common goal. The next steps include seeking out artists to participate and securing a canvas for the project in each community.

It was also proposed that a concert or event be held in Española to which residents from both towns would be invited to attend in an effort to show that it isn't necessarily a place deserving of the risk associated with visiting the town.

"Today, we took some steps forward in the right direction," EVHS student Chris Shamy said during the meeting's closing comments.

"It's gotta change; things have been this way for too long," LAHS Coach Bob Scott said.

"But nothing worth having is easy."

Observing the laughter and camaraderie amongst the teens, it becomes clear that JUNTOS's goal is not an impossible one. If the kids are an indicator of what could become a wide spread trend, it's a wonder there are any tensions at all.