

## URBAN TEENS HEAR CALL OF THE WILD - AND IT BEATS LURE OF THE STREETS

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Growing up as a street kid in New York City, Stella Chao found her haven in the parks - she sought refuge from gang crimes and lecherous men high above ground, hidden among the tree branches.

"Nobody ever looked up," Chao said. "That's where I'd go to be safe."

During the decade she lived on and off the streets, Chao developed an appreciation for the outdoors. These days, she shares her passion with teenagers from Seattle's Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

Two years ago, Chao founded a youth environmental-activist group called WILD - Wilderness-Inner City Leadership Development - to expose teenagers from low-income families to the challenges and opportunities the wilderness offers.

WILD members go kayaking, rock climbing and river rafting, but more importantly, Chao said, they develop leadership and survival skills, self-confidence and a respect for others.

"WILD gives us a place to go and hang out," said Anna Leung, 14. "We're like a big family even though we're from all different cultures."

Through workshops conducted by the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice and group projects and presentations, the teenagers bring environmental awareness to their communities.

Group members used their language skills to educate their communities about the harmful solvents used by dry cleaners, proper disposal of household cleaning products, storm-drain pollutants from used motor oil, litter and food waste and the environmentally hazardous plastic foam used by many restaurants.

Funded by the Environmental Protection Agency, WILD has given teenagers opportunities to effect change. The youth were the first to raise awareness about the Veterans Affairs Medical Center's medical-waste incinerator, which polluted the air on Beacon Hill.

The VA incinerator was shut down last fall.

The group's twice-weekly meetings also help keep the kids out of trouble, said Saul Cornwall, WILD's program manager.

Most of the 20 members are Chinese, Vietnamese and Filipino immigrants living in the International District, South or West Seattle. Their parents often work long hours, hold several jobs and have little contact with the youths who are struggling to find acceptance in U.S. society. Some do so by joining neighborhood gangs.

"WILD challenges the kids and opens their minds," said Juan Lozano, a youth coordinator and AmeriCorps member. "We make them realize that there's more out there than their neighborhoods and their friends."

Last Thursday, the teenage volunteers met with the International District's older residents on a beach trip meant to foster mutual respect and understanding.

"Most of the elderly around here have never been out of the neighborhood," said Paul Kim, 14. "They kind of look down on young people."

"The trip will give us a chance to show them that not all teens are the same. Some of us are trying to do stuff for the community."

The teenagers' mission was to educate their elders on the link between water pollution and seafood consumption, a major component of Asian and Pacific Islander diets.

Assigned by language, they lead beach tours along Emma Schmitz Park near Alki Beach in Chinese, Vietnamese and Tagalog, explaining ways to avoid getting sick from seafood toxins.

For both groups, the encounter amounted to more than an environmental lesson.

"Young people are closer to the American lifestyle," said He Ming Qing, 58. "Although we're old, we still need to learn about what's going on today."

Lucio Gomez, 80, recorded the day's event on his video camera.

"When I take my vacation to the Philippines, I will tell lots of stories about these kids," he said.

The teenagers say WILD has equipped them with life skills.

"Now I feel comfortable getting up in front of a group and talking," said once-shy 14-year-old Jeffrey Lopez.

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• **Caption: PHOTOGENEVIEVE LIANG / THE SEATTLE TIMES: STUDENT PHUC PHAM, CENTER LEFT, DISCUSSES WATER POLLUTION WITH SENIOR GUEST VUNG NGUYEN DURING A FIELD TRIP TO EMMA SCHMITZ PARK IN WEST SEATTLE. IN THE FOREGROUND ARE STUDENT TRI LAM AND SENIOR LOAN NGUYEN. THE TRIP WAS PART OF THE WILDERNESS INNER-CITY LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROJECT.**

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