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Role model by phone

Sunset students speak to author they're reading

By Kelley Atherton

Triplicate staff writer

First they read about Francisco Jiménez's journey as a small boy from Mexico to California, and now they're learning about his fight to stay in America and go to college.

Last week, students at Sunset Continuation High School had the chance to interview the author of "The Circuit," "Breaking Through" and "Reaching Out," stories about Jiménez's life as a migrant, student and now professor.

They asked him about his family, what college was like, his heritage and what advice he had for young people.

Jiménez told the 50 or so students who crowded into Sunset's cafeteria over a speak-

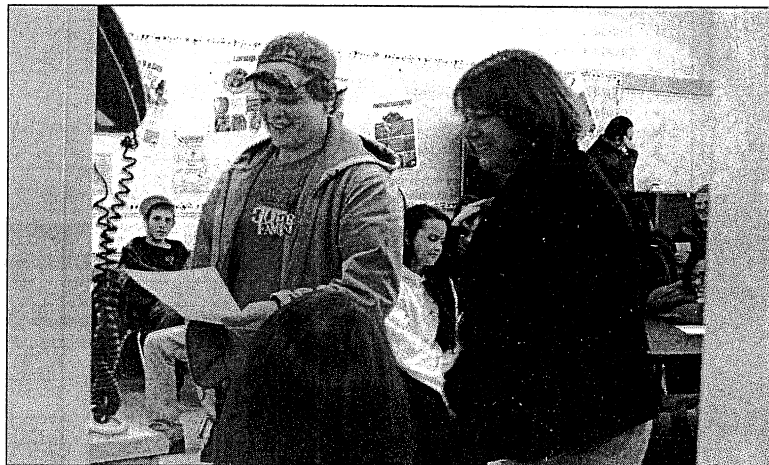
er phone that education was the key to success.

"Whatever you want to do, education makes it possible," he said. "Take advantage of education and you will succeed."

Belonging somewhere

Jiménez's books are part of the Character Based Literacy program, which most of the alternative education programs in Del Norte County have started doing this year.

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Submitted photo

Kenny Bower, a student at Sunset Continuation High School, speaks to author Francisco Jiménez over a speakerphone at the high school, while principal Suzie Dooley looks on.

Author

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The program is a project of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, where Jiménez teaches.

The students have formed a profound connection to Jiménez's story about rising from poverty to become a university professor, said Suzie Dooley, the principal at Sunset.

Dooley contacted Jiménez about speaking with the students.

The high schoolers asked him what college was like and whether his heritage as a Mexican was ever an obstacle.

"My first year in college (at Santa Clara University) was the hardest time," he said. "The environment was very different from which I was raised."

"I was torn between my studies and family duties," Jiménez said. "I felt guilty being in a nice environment while my family was suffering in poverty."

While in college, Jiménez worked three jobs and sent money back to his family when he could, he said.

Coming from a family of migrants, Jiménez said he didn't feel like he belonged in college, but knew he couldn't let down those who believed in him.

"I have always been proud of my heritage," he told the students, who come from a variety of backgrounds. "I never felt it was an obstacle. It was a positive aspect of my life."

"You don't have to give it up," Jiménez said about one's heritage, "to adopt to the mainstream culture. You can have the best of both worlds."

Learning to be successful

Dooley is a big fan of the Character Based Literacy program, citing the major improvements that she and teachers have seen in the students this semester.

"This is the best stuff I've ever seen," said Dooley, who has been an educator for 26 years.

It was developed for adjudicated and at-risk students, she said.

Many Sunset students are considered at-risk, which means they're underachieving at school or contemplating dropping out because of emotional problems, family struggles or other challenges.

"It's not just one thing," Dooley said of at-risk students. Rather, they typically have "three big life challenges."

But there are also many students at Sunset who are on an accelerated path toward graduation, Dooley said, and prefer an alternative education setting to traditional high school.

The Character Based Literacy program books present role models for students, Dooley said.

"A lot of our students don't have strong, positive role models," she said.

Through literature, the students learn about problem solving and that actions have consequences, Dooley said.

The students aren't just reading, but discussing in class what happens in the book and reflecting on story themes.

"Every day they do a writing," Dooley said, with a prompt about a theme from the book. "They have to relate something in their life to the book."

During the conversation with Jiménez, the students were curious about what happened to his siblings and parents.

He told them that many of his siblings, their spouses and children were now teachers.

"The reason why is because we value education," Jiménez explained. "It was the means by which we were able to escape our poverty."

"We were blessed," he continued. "It was our obligation to give back and help young people like yourselves."

Becoming better writers

In addition to reading stories, the students have to write their thoughts and feelings about what they read.

Writing can be hard for at-risk students, Dooley said. Children learn how to speak and listen first. If they don't have regular conversations at a young age, students are behind by high school and writing becomes "a more difficult task."

She cited a statistic showing the contrast between students who have a healthy home life and those who don't: a traditional high school student has a 40,000-word vocabulary, an at-risk student only knows about 10,000 words.

Every day, the students go over the timeline of events, and learn five new words from the book and their definitions, Dooley said.

Each teacher who uses the program has a word wall in the classroom with pictures students have drawn to illustrate words. On one wall, the words include "sluggish," "chamois" to "undocumented."

Jiménez spoke of the importance of hard work and setting goals as a way to grow as students.

"If you encounter obstacles, don't let them defeat you," he said. "And reach out for help, to the people at your school."

Jiménez told the students he never thought he would become a college professor, but in sixth-grade realized he wanted to be like a teacher who had helped him.

Effect on students

Dooley and teachers have noticed that Jiménez's story has had an effect on the students' attitudes and behaviors for the better.

Joan Kienzle, one of the instructors who is teaching the Character Based Literacy class, said the program has students writing more than before and they're remembering what they're reading.

"They have a connection with the book," she said.

Jiménez has given them an example of a person, she continued, who "overcame odds to become somebody."

They asked him what he still wanted to accomplish in his life.

His answer was to help eliminate prejudice and create a society inclusive of all groups. But, he said that he knows this might not happen in his lifetime.

Jiménez realized he could do something by writing his and his family's story.

He participated in a United Farm Workers' march from Delano to Sacramento calling for a boycott of grapes until the farms signed union contracts with the workers.

"At the end of the march, I was committed to do something for farm workers, but I didn't know how to," Jiménez said. "Through writing ... I could give readers insight into what migrant life is like."

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