

Opening their eyes to new opportunities

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POINT LOMA – They say it's a place that made generations of boys into men before sending them off to war or uncertainty.

Today, there's a new brand of recruits at the former Naval Training Center in Point Loma.

But this is a different kind of boot camp, one that offers exercises in modern dance, quilt-making, ceramics and karate to students who typically aren't exposed to the arts.

On a recent afternoon, Michael Abebe of Linda Vista was sitting in an art studio carefully arranging broken tiles, glass and mirrors for a mosaic wall-hanging.

"I've never done anything like this," Michael, 12, said. "I'm not sure what I'm doing. It's OK. I think I like it."

Liberty School is the latest program to come from the NTC Foundation, the arts and culture hub of the city's redevelopment project called Liberty Station. Just months old, the school offers enrichment classes to students who have been expelled from school for zero-tolerance violations and to students from nearby Dewey Elementary School, where a majority of children live in military housing.

"I hope this is a place that is setting these students up for new opportunities," said Alan Ziter, executive director of the NTC Foundation.

Paid for with a \$500,000 Community Reinvestment Act grant from San Diego National Bank, the program started in September and accommodates about 75 students. Ziter plans to expand the classes to more students once the foundation secures more donations.

About 85 percent of the current crop of students are boys. As a result, instructors have been creative about how they approach their work. For example, modern dance class has been renamed "movement class," a far less threatening course for sports-minded 12-year-olds.

They attend classes in some of the base's most historic buildings, which the foundation has renovated. Classes are taught by Liberty Station's resident art, culture and science organizations, giving dancers and artists income and a chance to share their passion.

In addition to exposing children to the arts, organizers want the youngsters to feel at home at the former NTC. The site has been transformed into a community with parks, shops, schools and other amenities that are open to the public.

It's a place where many Dewey students have never been, even though they live a short walk away.



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune
Zachary Cobb, 9, a third-grader at nearby Dewey Elementary School, concentrated last month on a dance being taught at Liberty School, the site of the former Naval Training Center.



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune
Josh Gomez, 12, signed his name on the back of the mosaic he created. Josh attends the Alternative Learning for Behavior and Attitude school.

Some of these students haven't been in San Diego very long and are somewhat isolated in their housing complexes, said Vera Valdivia, Dewey's principal.

“A lot of these families are struggling with multiple deployments,” Valdivia said. “Often, their parents don't know San Diego and they are young and have young children. A lot of times, the kids just stay home and play video games all day.”

Valdivia encourages her students to visit the park and shops of Liberty Station on weekends with their families. It's an easy excursion for families and one that ties in to their military roots.

Dewey third-graders attend classes at Liberty School one day a week. Students from the Alternative Learning for Behavior and Attitude, a program in the San Diego Unified School District known as ALBA, come for a week at a time.

Classes are tied to state academic standards – often in unlikely ways. For example, a geometry lesson might be included in a quilting project.

The program was modeled after the School in the Park, cultural classes for students at Rosa Parks Elementary School developed by Price Charities for its educational project in City Heights.

The Navy shut down the boot camp at NTC more than 10 years ago and ceded the land to the city of San Diego for redevelopment. In 2000, the city partnered with The Corky McMillin Cos. to renovate the area and share some profits from the project.

The NTC Foundation is charged with the renovation of 26 historic buildings for arts, culture, science and technology programs. The foundation recently completed a \$26 million renovation of six buildings.

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