

October 19, 2018 02:11 PM
UPDATED 38 HOURS AGO

An anti-violence program decked out in a kerchief and badge vest

Restoring the Village, a new program unique to Chicago, brings Scouting to underserved neighborhoods for the first time.

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A Cub Scout learns the oath from Scout leaders Abel Rodriguez, left, and Cesar Mariano.

Restoring the Village, a new program unique to Chicago, brings Scouting to underserved neighborhoods for the first time.

Cesar Mariano grew up in Little Village. Unlike a lot of boys his age in the United States, he didn't hear about Boy Scouts until he was in high school. These days, Mariano, 43, is a

cubmaster for Cub Scout Pack 1986 in Little Village. The pack, established in spring 2017, is the first Boy Scout troop in Little Village in decades, if ever.

On a recent Thursday afternoon, Mariano and the Scouts, 27 altogether, spent time making slime and preparing for an October celebration. Up in Glencoe, that might be Halloween. The Little Village Scouts were rehearsing their program for Day of the Dead, a Mexican holiday that honors departed loved ones. For the Oct. 25 celebration, each will bring a photo of a departed relative and recite a few lines about him or her. Parents will bring Mexican hot chocolate and sweet pan de muerto for a snack.

That's one of the many subtle differences between traditional Boy Scouting and Restoring the Village, the local council's attempt to bring Scouting to areas in the city affected by violence and poverty, areas that had their Scouting troops fade away long ago, or perhaps never had one to begin with. The council, Pathway to Adventure, has 90 boys and girls enrolled in six Restoring the Village troops, three in Chicago and three in Gary, with 13 more in development. Following the tradition of the 108-year-old organization, these Scouts wear olive-colored uniforms. They work on merit badges and recite the Pledge of Allegiance and the Scout Oath at their meetings.

But while troops in more affluent areas might require as much as \$400 per child for uniforms, dues and other Scout accoutrements, the council covers costs for Restoring the Village participants. Rather than embrace the outdoors with a weekend trip to a remote campsite, the Scouts first get to know the outdoors in local parks and forest preserves. Fishing and archery might be old hat for a Cub Scout in Lincoln Park; in South and West side areas, boys might be trying those activities for the first time.

The mission underlying it all: Training young people "to be an asset to the community, not a liability," says Jeff Isaac, CEO of Pathway to Adventure, which encompasses 20,000 Scouts in northern Illinois and northwest Indiana. The Pathway to Adventure council is the first in a major metro area to host such a program, says Isaac, 53, who has spent his entire career in the Boy Scouts organization. "We have 108 years of knowledge; we are really good at being able to do this," Isaac says. "We have to reintroduce ourselves to neighborhoods that haven't had us in a long time."



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Scout leader Juan Ortiz helps Scouts make slime. "The point is for kids to see positive role models at a very young age," says Cubmaster Cesar Mariano.

The kids work on "upgrowing" skills during meetings, says Mariano, branch manager at a U.S. Bank in Little Village. "Introduce yourself, shake hands, look people in the eyes—really basic stuff," he says. "And a sense of kindness. Young children feel they need to be tough to get by in life. And you don't need to. You get more done with a kind word." Mariano, like other volunteers for Pack 1986, is a first-generation college graduate. "The point is for kids to see positive role models at a very young age," he says.

The program, launched in Florida in 2012, came to Chicago in 2017 when Isaac, an architect of Restoring the Village, became CEO at Pathway to Adventure. Is it an anti-violence program decked out in a kerchief and badge vest? Yes, council officials say. "All Scouting values are around helping each other and helping their communities," says Stephen Schwab, partner at DLA Piper in Chicago and council president of Pathway to Adventure. "That doesn't involve violence in any sense." The program will also help Schwab's goal of diversifying the council and expanding it to 150,000 Scouts in the near future. "If you want to grow numbers, take (Scouting) to people who want it and need it," he says.

Schwab says that overcoming the Boy Scouts' reputation is one big hurdle to expansion. "People still think of us as an organization that keeps big groups of people away," he says of the Scouts, which did not allow openly gay members until 2013, did not allow openly gay adults to become leaders until 2015 and **opened the ranks to girls** only in 2017. That's changing, he says, adding that the council's **diversity and inclusion statement** is the most expansive among any council in the United States. The council is so committed to diversity that it designed a diversity patch for Scouts to wear on their vests.

FINDING FUNDS

Funding presents another hurdle, as the council covers dues, uniforms, events and other expenses for Restoring the Village participants. An anonymous donor gave \$1 million over five years to Restoring the Village, and all proceeds from this year's Whitney Young fundraiser, scheduled for Oct. 25, will support the program. The council's overall budget is \$8 million.

Parents with children who participate in Restoring the Village troops say the program makes a difference. Martha Valdez-Contreras's 13-year-old son joined a troop in Brighton Park last spring. "He's believing in himself now," she says. Her son was the only one in the troop to finish a merit badge for plumbing, which required soldering different kinds of pipes. He's also enrolled in a merit-badge clinic focusing on robotics. "Now there's a goal for him," says Valdez-Contreras, a stay-at-home mom who helped establish Troop 3201, which meets at Nathan Smith Davis Elementary School.

Scouting is "a positive addition" to the Little Village area, says Leticia Martinez, a human-resources coordinator at architecture firm Skidmore Owings & Merrill. Her 7-year-old son joined a pack at Our Lady of Tepeyac Elementary School last year. Activities such as fishing and archery have expanded his horizons. "Those are things we don't normally do," Martinez says.

Scouting memories, and a desire to give back, prompted Esau Chavez to volunteer as scoutmaster of Troop 3201 at Davis Elementary School. "In the city of Chicago, we have an after-school program called gangs," says Chavez, 23, an Eagle Scout and independent political consultant, who notes that he was "in and out" of street life when he was younger. "It's important to get through to these guys," he says.

When his 11-month-old son is old enough, Chavez hopes he'll join Cub Scouts. So Chavez is helping reinvent Scouting for his children—and, if Restoring the Village takes root, for his grandchildren, too.

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This story has been updated to remove a reference to Whitney Young High School.

Inline Play

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