

## **Division 3 Operator Considers Community Involvement Top Priority**

By AMY HOWELL

(August 15, 2002) Giving back to the community he grew up in is top priority for North Los Angeles Division 3 Operator Ron Chico.



North Los Angeles Division 3 Operator Ron Chico at the wheel.

In 1999, he became a coach for the Lincoln Heights Youth Association, an organization that enables about 150, 6- to 13-year-old boys and girls to participate in seasonal football and cheerleading.

"I'd always, always wanted to go back to the neighborhood and give back something, and make it a little bit better for the kids that grew up there," says Chico, a resident of Arcadia.

Raised by his mother, Chico grew up as part of a six-member household.

"There weren't a lot of opportunities, and there aren't a lot of opportunities for the kids there today," he says.

When he was growing up, gangs got along with each other. "Now, they're neighbors, and they're killing each other. It has a very profound effect on the kids there."

Early on during his tenure as a coach, a shooting occurred.

### **An increasing level of involvement**

"There were about seven or eight gun shots, and I was the only one who hit the floor," he recalls, describing the kids he coached as "desensitized" to the violence around them, although he adds, "These are nine- and ten-year-olds telling me, 'Coach, the ghetto sucks.'"

"It's not supposed to be like that," Chico says he told the kids. "You guys aren't supposed to live your lives like, 'When a shooting goes off, you go about your business.' Instead of just coaching, now I was trying to give life experiences to these kids."

At the beginning of this year, Chico became the president of the Lincoln Heights Youth Association.

Other community leaders encouraged Chico to become involved with the Los Angeles Citywide Alliance of Neighborhood Councils.

"It was just so I could make the Youth Association better, and get more kids involved," he says. "We didn't have enough exposure in the community. Not enough people knew about us."

Chico also joined a Lincoln Heights-focused steering committee, eventually becoming its co-vice chairperson. "The steering committee builds the foundation for how our Neighborhood Council is going to be made and who's going to run it—what we think we need to do to run ours and be more successful," he says.

### **Success of program is two-fold**

The success of the Youth Association is equated, in part, with accomplishing

this year's goal of raising \$26,000, which will primarily be used to buy new equipment and uniforms.

Car washes, a Youth Association-sponsored football clinic and a carnival held in June are among the ways money is being raised, as the organization doesn't receive funding from outside sources. Additionally, Chico's networking with community merchants generates some resources for social events held throughout the year.

It's success also is associated with the effect winning games has on the athletes.

"When they win, there is such a look of elation that I love to see," he said, noting that winning isn't everything. Rather, winning games yields a boost in spirit and self-esteem, a drive to achieve more and pride in schoolwork and getting good grades.

Chico would like to expand the Youth Association's sports programs to include baseball, basketball and soccer, so the athletes could be involved for more than one season a year. This also would enable them to travel outside their community, exposing them to other people and ways of life. Funding issues make expansion difficult, though.

"This position as president is probably one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life," Chico said. However, "to have that neighborhood changed for the kids—it's a dream that I'd like to see fulfilled before I die."

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