

SUMMER CAMP CAMPAIGN

Going on a family camping trip

Elvia Gonzalez and her children have gone to Rowdy Ridge Gang Camp for years.

SOPHIA LEE

As 17-year-old Baby Hernandez walked through the corridors of Hope Street Family Center in downtown Los Angeles, she felt tingles of nostalgia.

"I remember a lot of things here," Baby said, sharing a knowing smile with her mother, Elvia Gonzalez.

Baby and her 15-year-old brother, Angel, grew up crawling and running along these brightly lighted hallways decorated with colorful artworks by children.

"I still remember when Elvia first came to us as a teenager," said Sherrie Segovia, mental health coordinator of Hope Street Family Center, a community outreach benefit program of

California Hospital Medical Center that provides services such as child care, literacy programs and family support for working families downtown. "She was holding this tiny baby in her arms."

That infant was Baby, who was only a few months old when Gonzalez first visited the agency to attend classes to earn her high school degree. While Gonzalez studied, her children played at the childcare center just a few steps away from her classroom.

Together and apart

In many ways, Hope Street was their second home. Their annual family vacation was to the Rowdy Ridge Gang Camp, a week-long retreat in the San Gabriel Mountains run by the Scott Newman Center, which sponsors educational programs geared toward preventing substance abuse.

For five years, the whole family has been attending the camp, to which they ap-

plied through Hope Street. They look forward to it every year, they said. As they reminisce about the early camping days, their smiles get wider.

Although they go to camp together, mothers are separated from their children, and they see one another only during mealtimes. That allows for both greater intimacy and independence, Segovia said.

"She now has some time for herself, so she can recognize how much she appreciates and loves her children," Segovia said.

"It's about developing a relationship, developing a connection on a healthier and more positive level. You need the distance to see what you really appreciate about your family."

Gonzalez said the experience helped her learn how to be a better mother.

"[Going to camp] has helped me grow more as a person, to appreciate my kids more, to learn to have time to myself but, at the same time, explore different

things that I can do with my kids," she said.

About the campaign

Through the generosity of Times readers, along with a match by the McCormick Foundation, more than \$1.6 million was granted last year by the Los Angeles Times Summer Camp Campaign.

The Summer Camp Campaign, part of the Los Angeles Times Family Fund, a McCormick Foundation Fund, supports programs that provide thousands of Southern California's at-risk children ages 7 to 17 with enriching, educational and fun camp experiences.

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'Klown' books an L.A. date

KAREN WADA

"Ghetto Klown," John Leguizamo's latest one-man show, will open Oct. 2 for a two-week run at the Montalban Theatre in Hollywood.

The play, which ended a limited engagement on Broadway this month, describes the Obie- and Emmy-winning actor's often-bumpy journey from Queens to Hollywood.

Besides his eclectic film and TV work, Leguizamo is known for his uninhibited solo pieces and their depictions of colorful characters and experiences from his life. He burst onto the New York theater scene two decades ago with "Mambo Mouth," followed by shows