



SALT program is making a difference

Suzanne Corey

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suzanne Corey

Email:

news@ramonasentinel.com

She started doing methamphetamine when she was 13 years old. While other kids were worrying about fitting in, which sport they should join or their grade in math, she was starting down a path that would nearly ruin her. By the time she entered high school she was all but gone, the damage evident through her facial sores. Had she not found help, there is no way to say where she would be now. The teen, who wishes to remain anonymous, credits her life-changing experience to the new **SALT (Success Awareness Life Teaching) program at Montecito**

High School.

SALT is in its beginning stages, but the powerful results are gaining notice. The program is a facet of the **McAlister Institute**, a nonprofit company headquartered in El Cajon that provides treatment and education programs to youth in need. The institute already has a successful **Teen Recovery Center (TRC)** in Ramona, but this is the first time it is operating on a high school campus.

"We are the first school to have the program on site," said MHS counselor Mayra Vasquez. "We went through a 10-month process where we had to get many rounds of approval, but it was so worth it." Vasquez first realized the need for help when she conducted a survey on campus.

"We found out that many kids were using at the elementary level, with marijuana and alcohol being the most popular among them. I gathered all these pieces together and knew there was a real need," she said.

SALT is open to MHS students only and is completely free. Students make the choice to join and, once they enroll, they enter a four-month program where they are taught a curriculum to help them break free of whatever their issue may be. The program is not only for substance abusers, but also aids students with

anger management issues, loss or grief counseling, coping skills, and more.

The curriculum includes many guest presenters. Students have heard from drunk driving victim's families, medical examiners and law enforcement officers, to name a few.

Together, in a small group setting led by a **McAlister counseling professional**, they meet two times a week for 1 1/2 hours, all during the school day. They commit to staying drug and alcohol free during the program and expect random testing while they are enrolled. They also commit to absolute confidentiality, which helps maintain a close-knit, family-like atmosphere.

"There is always a waiting list," said Vasquez.

"There are many kids that want to be, that need to be in the program. Often, there is no support at home. In fact, sometimes parents are using as well, so this is all they have. SALT becomes their family."

Rigo Garcia, the community outreach and development specialist for McAlister Institute, has seen success in the local TRC programs.

"These kids go on to go to college or get good jobs. They come back and check in with us. It's really great when we see that."

He hopes that having sessions on campus will make

treatment and recovery more accessible for people in need.

Vasquez already notes the correlation between the SALT program and academic success.

"Kids who have had poor attendance start coming to school more," she said. "After awhile their grades improve, they earn their credit and they begin to get motivated. We just want to give the kids the opportunity to be successful in life. They are facing critical issues and we have to respond and provide the resources to give them a chance."

That same chance that the 13-year-old girl mentioned earlier got. **She has been clean for more than a year and frequently stops by Vasquez's office for lunch.** When she came in, she looked like an average high school student and Vasquez proudly introduced her as a graduate of the program, noting she was one of the first to enter. It certainly wasn't easy. She started with a 21 days detoxification, relapsed and went through again. She has since been in the program, volunteering to stay. **"The counselors really helped," she said. "I learned you can have fun in other ways than partying. I would be all messed up now if I didn't go through the program."**

MHS hopes the word will continue to spread about

SALT. Parents don't have to wait until it gets to the breaking point. They are welcome to refer their child at any time.

Also, **SALT and the TRC are open to donations.** The program runs 70 percent on county funds, but the rest is via fundraising.

"We do car washes, whatever we can," said Garcia, who adds that they are always looking for help.

"Whatever people can donate, ping pong tables for the recreation center, funds, whatever. We would use it all."

Garcia and Vasquez hope in the coming months and years that SALT will also work as an educational tool. So far, the process has taught both of them a lot. They have become aware of all that is happening and what to look for.

"We want to teach prevention as well," said Garcia.

"Drug manufacturers are getting really creative; some drugs are even made to look like candy."

Vasquez chimes in, "Kids just don't know yet and we hope to educate teachers and catch kids before they start."

For more information, parents may e-mail Vasquez at mvasquez@ramonausd.net or call 787-4300. Parents can also check out McAlister Institute at mcalisterinstitute.org.