

# Struggling students find a solution

It was the beginning of the semester, and Nena's dad was driving her up the wall. The two argued over seemingly everything — mostly about her boyfriend — and finally, she found a solution. A "stupid" solution, she said.

"We were always fighting and he was always mad at me and I couldn't go out because he wouldn't let me," the now 16-year-old remembers, "so I decided to start skipping class . . . a lot. It was the only time I had to get away."

Within weeks, with the missed classes stacking up and her grades slipping, Nena was sitting in front of a campus officer at Stony Point High School.

"I was called into the office and they said I'd been skipping too much, but he was going to give me an opportunity, and if I messed up he'd send me to court," she said. "And he told me about NCC."

Round Rock's NCC — the first Neighborhood Conference Committee in Williamson County — completed its first year this spring after touching the lives of more than 150 families dealing with truant children. The nonprofit program run by LifeSteps in partnership with the county, the City of Round Rock and Round Rock ISD kicked off this school year as a way for the community to defer truancy cases away from Precinct 1 Justice of the Peace Dain Johnson's docket.

"Dain was the catalyst and it just snowballed," LifeSteps Executive Director Efrain Davila said. "It's hard to get huge government entities to pull all as a team in the same direction at the same time, but he put aside all these other issues and focused on graduating kids. And that's



## BETTER TO GIVE

Rachel Slade

what NCC is all about."

The NCC had 42 volunteers this year who worked out of a small historic building situated beneath Round Rock's water tower courtesy of the county and city. And it's these volunteers who form panels for the hearings, meeting with students identified by school officials and their families to get to the root of the truancy issue, formulate an action plan for educational success, and send children back to school rather than into the court system. Of the 155 families who participated this year, more than half of the students completed their action plans. Among high schoolers who remained in the district all year, Mr. Davila estimates roughly three in four got their noses back in the books. And now he's looking forward to spreading the success.

"I'm 99 percent sure we'll be in Taylor starting this school year, and we're already in preliminary discussions with Georgetown," he said. "I see in the very near future an NCC in Cedar Park, Leander, Granger, countywide."

And Mr. Davila said that although the pilot program focused exclusively on truan-

cy violations, the NCC model is designed to deal with Class C misdemeanor behavior of all varieties, including curfew violations, disorderly conduct and graffiti.

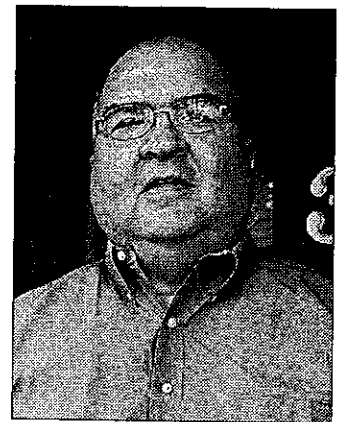
"They're minor, but to me they're outcries . . . and if we don't as a community listen to those outcries and have a plan to address whatever the issue is, these issues fester and grow and we end up with bigger problems, whether it's a pregnant student, a child on drugs, a bully," he said. "It's a simple concept: neighbors helping neighbors."

Round Rock may be the first to see the NCC scope expand; Municipal Court Judge Dan McNery has already contacted the organization about handling some of the cases on his own docket.

Mr. Davila says history shows that NCCs work and it's just a matter of making it work here in Williamson County. But his passion for the initiative is rooted in his past. He's been a public servant for 35 years, and helped start Travis County's now-robust NCC back in the mid-'80s, but it wasn't a path laid out for him during childhood.

"I was a mess when I was growing up 10 miles from the Mexican border," he said, "and if it wasn't for some key people stepping into my life early on, I don't know where I'd be honestly. And I think we all have those stories."

Nena's story will be one of success, she says. The NCC hearing gave her an opportunity to reconnect with her father — and one of the panelists, Mr. Davila's wife, helped her find her a job at a local Mexican restaurant to help ease the financial struggles that were keeping family emotions at a boiling



Efrain Davila  
LifeSteps Executive Director

point. Nena reports now that her grades have improved, and she's realized "skipping is just not a solution."

"What was important for me was they did really seem like they cared — and that made me think, and made me realize there really are people who do care," she said. "The thing that I had in my mind after was my mom caring, my dad and [the volunteers]. And then I wanted to help myself, too, and . . . I couldn't find a reason to skip."

With hard work, more grant writing (the group just received \$30,000 from the United Way of Williamson County), equally cooperative cities and school districts, a bevy of willing volunteers and a board that believes that during recessions nonprofits need to step it up even more, Mr. Davila believes NCC will be countywide within two years.

"The population is a moving target and we're constantly growing here in Williamson County, but I know NCC works," he said. "There's nothing that good, positive mentoring can't help — it's just magic."

slade@wilcosun.com