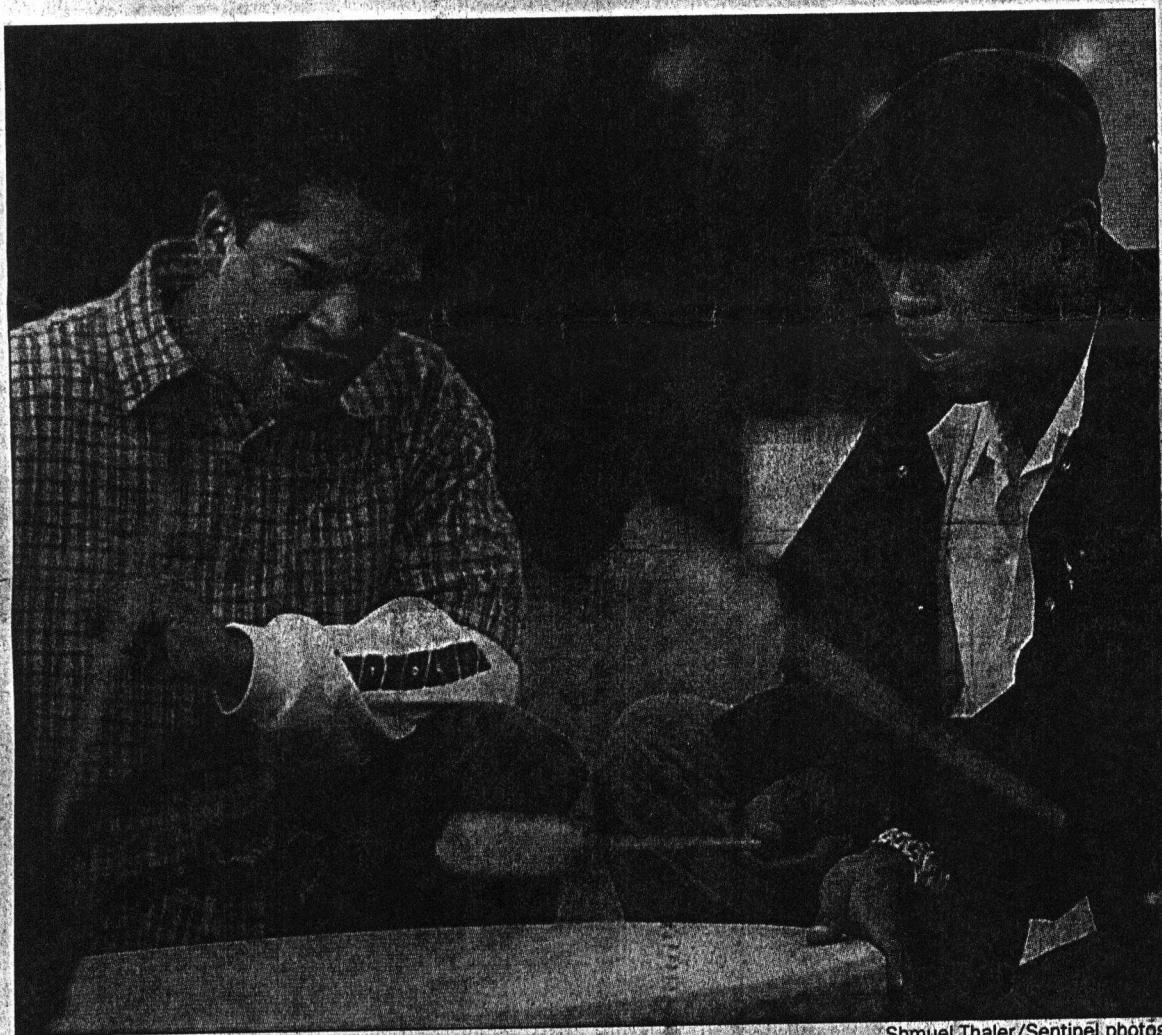


# BUILDING 'BROWN POWER'

In the 1960s, a group of Latinos put a radical face on the Chicano rights movement. More than 30 years later, carrying the same name and similar message, the Brown Berets are re-emerging as a political force in Santa Cruz County.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Brothers Tomas and Avrum Alejo lead a protest chant at a Brown Berets rally against conditions at the California Youth Authority. The Brown Berets are trying to become a more powerful voice in politics.

By **DONNA JONES**

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

**WATSONVILLE** — Boos, jeers and charges of racism rang through the meeting hall when school leaders in the Pajaro Valley took up the contentious issue of splitting the sprawling school district.

The angry crowd that night in February heckled district trustees and staff as well as speakers whose views they opposed.

Though one of the most inflamed meetings, it wasn't the first to degenerate into fiery protest. Similar fireworks occurred during school board debates over whether to name the district's third high school after legendary labor and civil rights leader Cesar Chavez. And when the school board voted 4-3 in January to force a charter school specializing in bilingual education to relocate, more than 200 people voiced disapproval with a deafening chant.

Taking the heat for the protests — and pegged by critics as intimidating and stifling free-speech — is a group of activists known as the Brown Berets.

"In order to make change, sometimes you have to be loud to get people's attention," said Tomas Alejo, a leader in the group, during an interview at Norma's Family Restaurant on Freedom Boulevard on a recent Saturday afternoon.

While members often make up only a fraction of protesters at public meetings, they are usually among the most vocal and make no apologies for their boisterous behavior. But Alejo and others add that those who criticize the group based on unruly meetings have little understanding of its mission or its accomplishments, and backers say critics may simply be taking issue with the group's left-leaning politics.



The Brown Berets gather after returning from a trip to Sacramento to preserve state funding for university outreach programs.

the 1960s, which took inspiration from radical groups like the Black Panthers, members insist that today's incarnation works as a positive force to steer youth from gangs and drug use by promoting education, cultural awareness and activism.

"We're like a family," said Jose Sanchez, a former farmworker and, at 38, the oldest member of the group. "There's no single group in Watsonville doing so much."

As the local group celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, leaders look to expand by forging connections with North County institutions, such as the Santa Cruz-based Resource Center for Nonviolence. They've also been contacted by activists in Fresno and Visalia, who are interested in starting chapters there.

And the group is consciously trying to build the future leadership of Watsonville.

## History of Brown Berets

**1967:** The original Brown Berets are founded to fight police brutality and poor conditions in schools in East Los Angeles.

**1972:** Berets fizzle out due to infighting and rumored police infiltration.

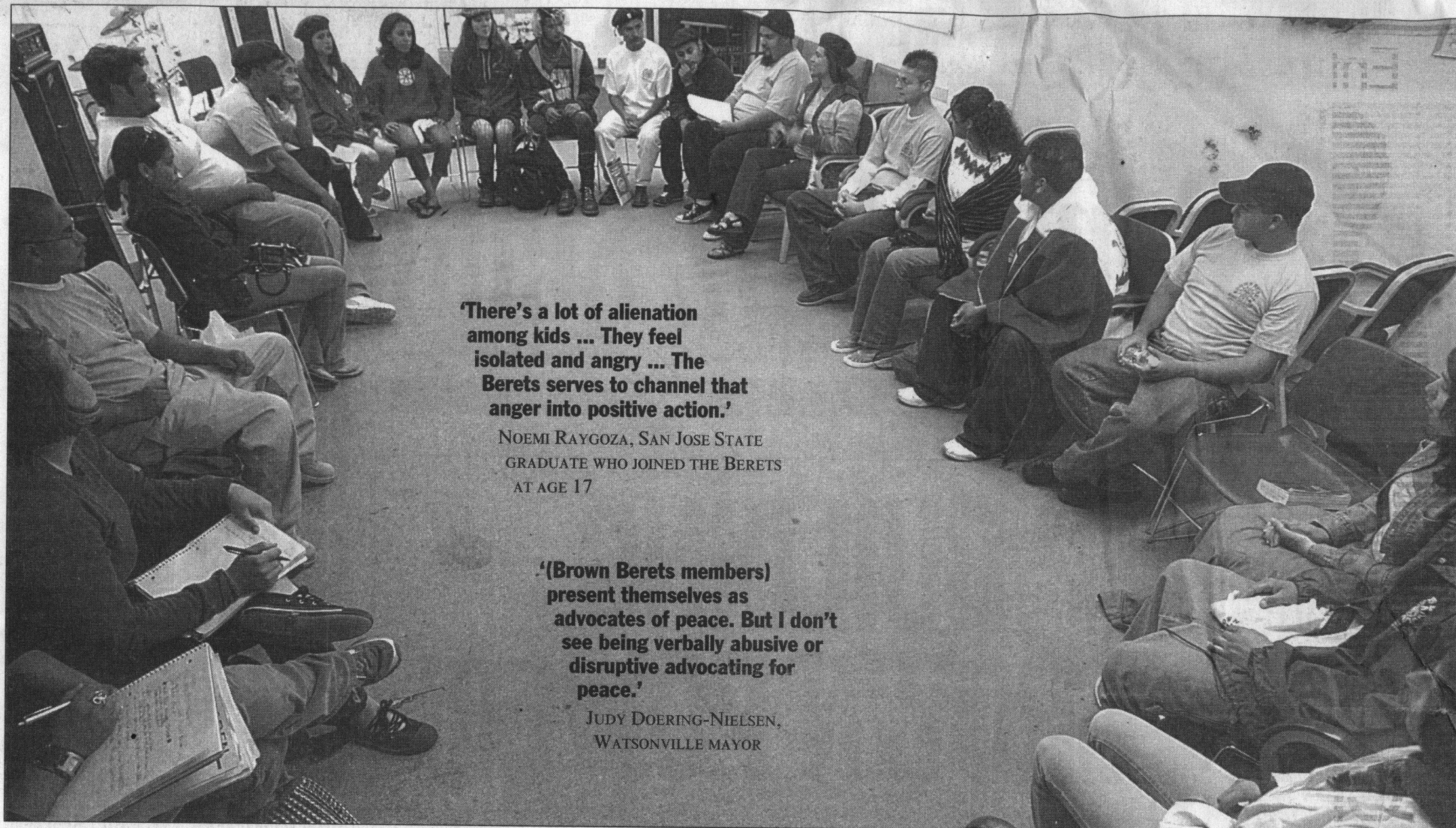
**1994:** Watsonville Brown Berets founded in the wake of gang violence. Group sponsors the city's first Peace and Unity March.

**2002:** Berets fight losing battle to name the Pajaro Valley's newest high school after Cesar Chavez.

**2003:** Berets take stance against splitting the Pajaro Valley school district. (After an angry meeting in early 2004, school officials put the proposal on hold.)

**2004:** Berets call for naming the Pajaro Valley's newest elementary school, slated to open in the fall on Ohlone Parkway in Watsonville.





**'There's a lot of alienation among kids ... They feel isolated and angry ... The Berets serves to channel that anger into positive action.'**

NOEMI RAYGOZA, SAN JOSE STATE GRADUATE WHO JOINED THE BERETS AT AGE 17

**'(Brown Berets members) present themselves as advocates of peace. But I don't see being verbally abusive or disruptive advocating for peace.'**

JUDY DOERING-NIELSEN, WATSONVILLE MAYOR

The Brown Berets gather at a weekly meeting to plan a strategy. The left-leaning group is active in a number of local, state and national issues.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

## Family ties: The Alejos involvement in the Brown Berets

By **DONNA JONES**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — To many, the politically active Alejo family is synonymous with the Brown Berets.

But family members, whose outspoken views make them a "lightning rod" for criticism, downplay their role in the activist group.

It's easy to see why people would make the connection.

Luis Alejo, 30, a lawyer with California Rural Legal Assistance, launched the Brown Berets with friends in 1994 and remains involved. His brothers Tomas, 32, Avrum, 22, and Isaac, 21, are members, and sister Ruth, 26, who just completed a master's degree at New York University, has been active in the past. Also, the 10-year-old group meets in a room at the downtown La Manzana Center rented to Hope Ministries, the church oper-

## Brown Berets

Continued from Page A1

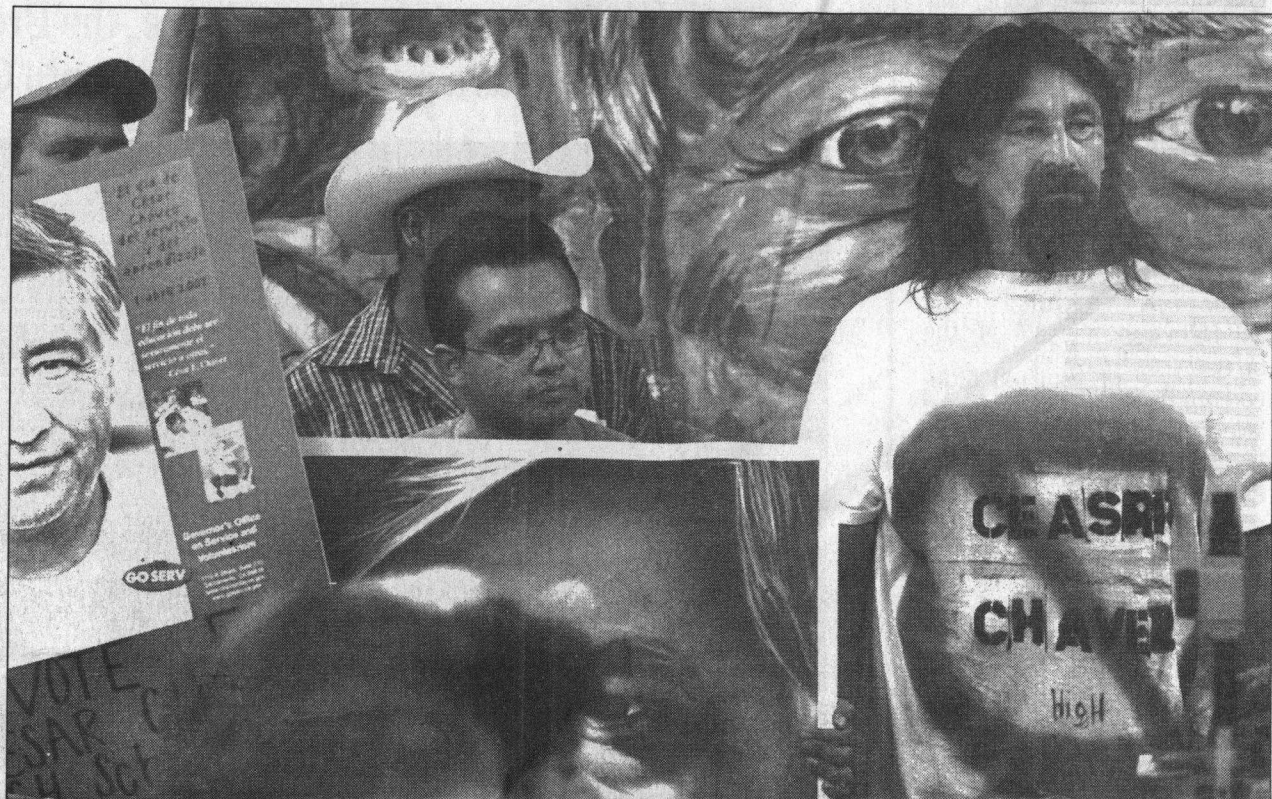
"To young people, we say, 'We want to see you on the school board, on the city council,' " said Luis Alejo, one of the founders of the group and brother of Tomas Alejo. "They have worked on these issues from an early age, and 10 years down the road with community organizing experience and with a college degree, they are the kinds of representatives we need."

### Inspiring history

The local group of Brown Berets was launched in Watsonville in 1994 as the city struggled with a flare-up of gang violence.

That year, Jessica Cortez, 9, and her brother, Jorge, 16, were gunned down in front of a Pajaro bakery. A few months later Antonio Valdivia, 19, was killed in a gang-related shooting near Manresa State Beach.

Seeking to counter the growing violence, a small group of high school and college students found inspiration in





Luis Alejo denies the Brown Berets' familial characterization, which he insists comes from detractors eager to minimize the group's efforts.

"They're not able to see this is a diverse group of students," Alejo said. "If it was just us or for us, this group would not have survived for such a long time ... Volunteer students put in a lot of hours at meetings, fund raising, calling members and organizing events. Most community members never see that."

Still, there's no denying the Alejos are a driving force in the organization. And their participation, as much as the Brown Berets' activities themselves, appears to fuel the resentment expressed about the group by some in the community.

"The family itself is like a lightning rod no matter what the issue," said Dennis Osmer, a lifelong Watsonville resident and former mayor.

One of the family's more controversial stands has been support for the United Farm Workers union, and proposals to honor Cesar Chavez, who, along with Dolores Huerta, founded the union. Many growers in the agricultural community remain bitter over UFW attempts to organize the Pajaro Valley in the 1970s. A more recent effort to unionize strawberry fields raised tensions again.

Osmer said he didn't know the Alejo children but described his relationship with the parents as cordial. The Alejos are outspoken and can be abrasive, he said, adding that those qualities also could be attributed to him and his late father, former police chief and councilman Frank Osmer.

"When you're outspoken, that's going to cause some friction," Osmer said.

Much of the criticism leveled at the Alejos comes from the more conservative side of the community.

Mayor Judy Doering-Nielsen said though she knows little about the Brown Berets, she disapproves of the way "some members," referring to the Alejos, have attacked City Councilman Richard de la Paz.

When de la Paz, a political ally of Doering-Nielsen, was investigated last year for his part in an altercation at a local bar, members of the Alejo family called for his ouster as mayor.

More recently, Avrum Alejo filed a police report, charging that de la Paz had tried to start a fight with him at a party. The District Attorney's Office did not file charges.

De la Paz, who has made statements like Latinos should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, is considered a conservative. The Alejos lean decidedly left.

Luis Alejo said his grandparents were among the first supporters of the UFW in Watsonville, and he recalls his grandfather taking him to marches when he was a child.

That political heritage influenced his parents and "trickled down to us as children," Alejo said.

"We want to be a progressive voice on a lot of issues, issues related to housing, economic development and improving school conditions."

Contact Donna Jones at  
djones@santacruzsentinel.com.

(Mexican American) rights group that flourished briefly in the late 1960s. The local revival was part of a statewide trend in the early '90s aimed at combating gang activity.

"One of the things the Brown Berets tries to do is subsidize nonviolence and education," Luis Alejo told the Sentinel in 1994.

The original Brown Berets, founded in Los Angeles in 1967, combined social programs, such as the operation of a free health clinic, with political protest. The group fought against police brutality and for improvement of public schools. Later members adopted a more comprehensive critique of American political policy, including opposition to the Vietnam War.

The group's trademark headgear, from which it derived its name, symbolized racial pride.

"They were a paramilitary group that espoused radical ideas," said Ernesto Chávez, a history professor at the University of Texas, El Paso. "But in the long run they were reformist."

Their actions were more symbolic than revolutionary, explained Chávez, whose book about Chicano political movements in the 1960s and '70s includes a chapter on the Brown Berets.

In an action reminiscent of the better known seizure of Alcatraz Island by members of the American Indian Movement, for example, a group of Brown Berets occupied Catalina Island off the coast of Southern California in August 1972 to call attention to its demands for social justice.

"They marched around and camped out," Chávez said. "Eventually sheriffs show up and tell them it's illegal and they leave."

From its Los Angeles base, the Brown Berets established chapters throughout California and the Southwest. But by 1972, splintering leadership and rumored infiltration by law enforcement had led to the group's demise.

Members say the newer Watsonville incarnation borrowed ideas from the older group and, in addition, adopted the nonviolent teachings of Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King Jr. as well as tapped into local cultural institutions like the White Hawk Dancers for an infusion of Aztec and Native American spirituality.

The local group's first major project was the 1994 inauguration of the Peace and Unity March, an annual procession in Watsonville that commemorates Santa Cruz County residents who have died from violence. The march was most recently held in September.

Larry Trujillo, a UC Santa Cruz history lecturer and former director of the university's Chicano Latino Resource Center, said he has encountered members of the Watsonville group pursuing their education at the university.

"They promote kids to go to college, outreach, service to the community, all

Watsonville Brown Beret founder Luis Alejo displays a photograph of Cesar Chavez at a 2002 school board meeting.

the right things young people should be aspiring for," Trujillo said.

## Under fire

But critics worry about a different lesson young people may be taking from the Brown Berets.

Willie Yahiro is a school board member whose support for dividing the Pajaro Valley district has made him a target for hecklers.

"If they're teaching kids that you're going to empower kids by showing them how to take over a public meeting and not let others speak, I'm not sure that's the empowerment we want to condone," Yahiro said. "The very thing we want to respect is civil rights, to be able to speak."

Sanchez, the older Beret, said the group has tried to work within the system but doesn't feel its voice is getting heard. Despite gathering thousands of signatures, mobilizing dozens of supporters to attend meetings and winning the support of area politicians for its proposal to name the district's third high school after Chavez, for example, the school board voted down the idea.

Yahiro, who voted against naming the school after the labor leader, said if he doesn't believe in something, it doesn't help supporters to get louder.

"Tell me some other argument that will make me change my mind," he said. "If they're trying to convince people to change their minds based on those (disruptive) tactics, I don't think that's going to work. If anything, it makes for a bigger divide."

Mas Hashimoto, a former Watsonville High School teacher, wanted the new high school to be called Freedom. He said he wasn't intimidated at meetings by Chavez backers, but he called their strategy counterproductive.

"They really turned people off," he said.

Despite complaints about meeting conduct, police said they couldn't recall ever having to intervene.

Police Capt. Manny Solano said efforts by the Brown Berets to stem gang violence have been valuable, especially the annual peace march. Though the differing approaches of the Brown Berets and law enforcement toward gang suppression have created tension at times, in general, the police department has a good relationship with the group, he said.

"We stay in communication and work with each other," Solano said.

Still, reports linking the Brown Berets to disorderly meetings are contributing to the group's negative perception in the community.

Watsonville Mayor Judy Doering-Nielsen said her opinion was based on

what she had heard.

"They present themselves as advocates of peace," she said. "But I don't see being verbally abusive or disruptive advocating for peace."

Carlos Rico, a former Watsonville grocer who served on the school board in the early 1990s, said he didn't like what he has heard either. He also acknowledged he hasn't agreed with the Brown Berets on issues.

"In a democracy, if you're interested in something, use the channels," Rico said. "Don't try to shout people down."

But Brown Berets member Ramiro Medrano, a city recreation leader and recent Cabrillo College graduate, said the group won't accept defeat quietly.

"Even after the end, we'll keep fighting if we don't think something's fair," he said.

Pedro Castillo, a UCSC history professor who lived in Watsonville until taking the job as provost of Oakes College two years ago, said he'd call the Brown Berets "assertive."

There's room in politics for those who work within the system and those, "as they used to say back in the '60s, 'who throw rocks from outside,'" Castillo said. "Sometimes you have to throw rocks."

## Meeting of the minds

Anna Marquez, an 18-year-old Renaissance High School senior and secretary to the group, offered some advice to Brown Berets' critics.

"Go to (our) meeting and see what you think about it," she urged.

About three dozen mostly high school and college students gathered on a recent Wednesday for the regular weekly meeting in a large room at the La Manzanita Center downtown. Sitting in a large circle, members shared events in their lives before moving on to business.

One teen mentioned finding the perfect prom dress, another the essay he still had to write for class the next day. One member reported on his participation at a city-sponsored session on planning.

But talk quickly moved to politics as speakers from San Francisco-based Books Not Bars spoke about abuse of young prisoners confined in the California Youth Authority.

Other talks from speakers and members have touched on gay rights, the environment, AIDS, gender, religion and college financing, members said.

Education, both as a way to get informed about issues and a means of empowerment, is a key component of the group's mission. At the recent meeting, nearly all the high-schoolers' hands shot up when the group was asked who planned to attend college. Many of the

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file

## Brown Berets politics

The Brown Berets has embraced a number of local, state and national issues.

■ Support naming a Pajaro Valley school after Cesar Chavez.

■ Support allowing undocumented workers to obtain drivers' licenses.

■ Oppose splitting the Pajaro Valley Unified School District.

■ Opposed the high school exit exam in 2003.

■ Opposed cutbacks to university and college outreach programs in 2004.

■ Oppose the war in Iraq.

The group also organizes annual events, including:

■ Youth and Empowerment Conference (since 2002).

■ The Peace and Unity March (since 1994).

older members have gone off to college and returned to serve as mentors.

Noemi Raygoza joined the Berets when she was 17. She graduated from Aptos High School in 1998 and then from San Jose State. She works as a family service worker for Migrant Head Start, a federally funded preschool program operated by the Pajaro Valley Unified School District.

Engaging youth in political activism keeps them out of trouble and encourages their aspirations, she said.

"There's a lot of alienation among kids," she said. "They feel isolated and angry ... The Berets serves to channel that anger into positive action."

Younger members say the group has given them the opportunity to work on issues that affect their community, such as pushing state legislators to allow undocumented workers to obtain drivers licenses.

Rita Nava, 17, is a junior at Renaissance High School. She plans to enroll at Cabrillo College to study child development after graduating from high school. She's also interested in acting.

Earlier this month, Nava went to Sacramento with a group of Brown Berets as part of a statewide student protest against cuts to university outreach programs. She also was part of a contingent at an April peace march in San Francisco. She said she liked being part of marches that brought together people from all races and nationalities in common cause.

"It makes me feel like I'm doing something good," Nava said.

Contact Donna Jones at  
djones@santacruzsentinel.com.