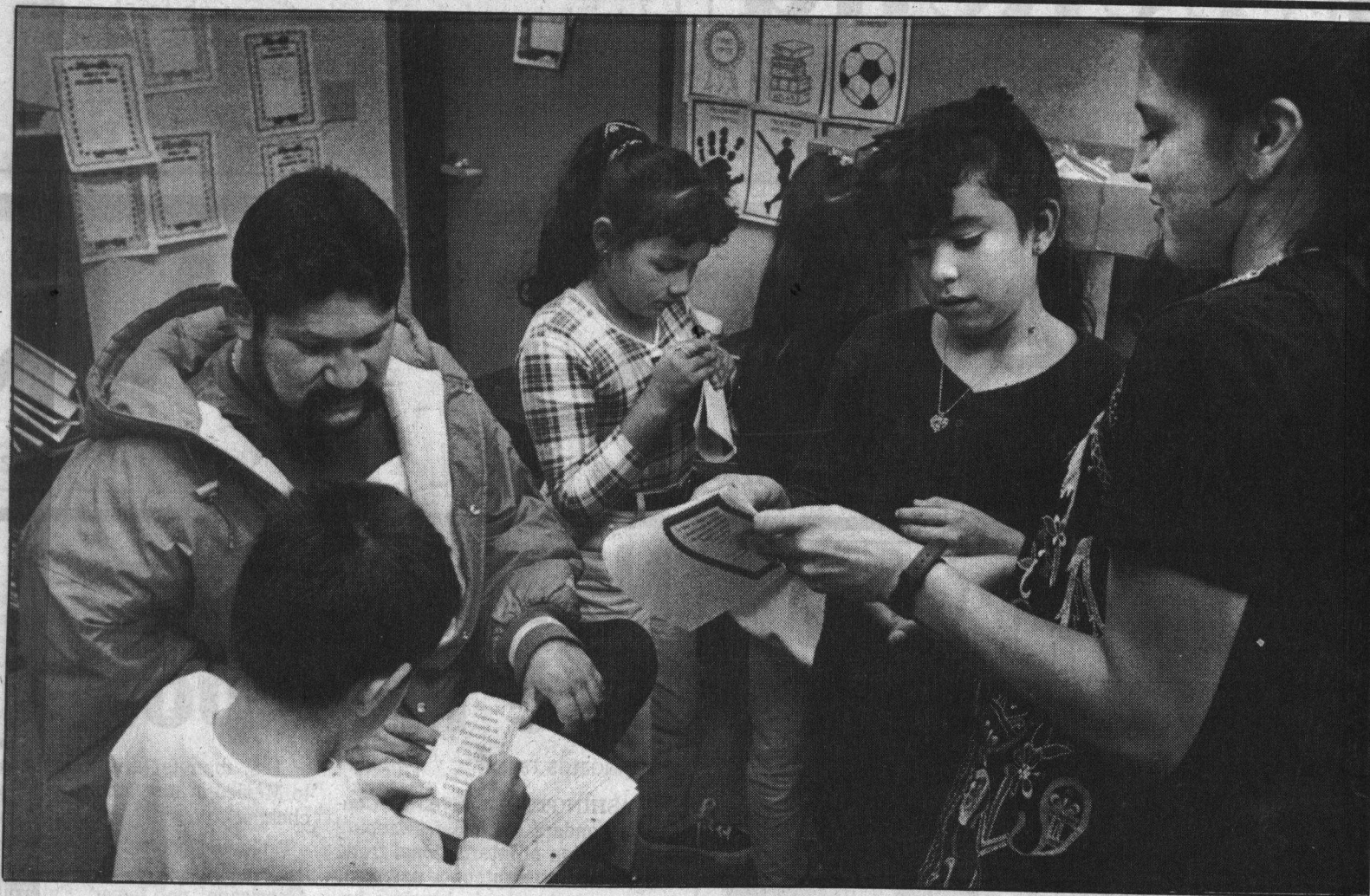


The Watsonville Youth Center is a favorite after school hangout. It gives kids a safe place to play games, do homework, and socialize.



Photos by Mike McCollum

Francisco Ramirez, left, prevention specialist and Edith Hernandez, right, outreach worker, help children at Youth Center fill out forms that will let parents know where they are in the afternoon.

Youth Center

Watsonville center many things to many people

By EMILIO ALVARADO
STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE'S new youth center is many things to many young people. But one thing is for sure: The youth center is fun.

Since it opened Sept. 30, the Gene Hoularis and Waldo Rodriguez Youth Center has grown to 500 members, said Luis Medina, the center's coordinator.

It is a favorite after school hangout, Medina said. It gives kids a safe place to play games, do homework, and socialize, he said.

The youth center offers a variety of activities, from playing cards to court games. It even

'We want to show them that there's other stuff besides what they see on the streets.'

— *Edith Hernandez,
Pajaritos program*

has indoor hockey and soccer. A weight room will soon be opened, Medina said.

The youth center is open Monday through Friday, 3 to 6 p.m. Children ages 6 to 12 generally use the center from 3 to about 4:30 p.m., Medina said. Older teenagers use the center after the younger kids have cleared out, he said.

There is no fee for joining and registration is held on Fridays. Youth center members receive a picture identification card that is presented each time they come in.

Wednesday is reserved for girls, Medina said. Boys, he said, tend to be more aggressive and domineering than girls when playing games. Some girls find this intimidating and most decide not to participate, he said. On Wednesday, girls have full run of the youth center and can participate in whatever activity they want in a more

relaxed atmosphere, he said.

Friday is movie night. The youth center shows a video, usually a "G-rated" movie, Medina said. The staff takes suggestions from the kids, but the staff decides which movie will be shown.

Before the youth center opened, police expressed concern that gang members would come to the center and start trouble. That has not happened, Medina said. The center's staff stays right on top of any potentially unsafe situation, he said.

"It's been really good," Medina said. "We haven't had any real problems."

The city, Salud Para La Gente and Fenix Services oversee management of the youth center. Salud Para La Gente conducts periodic health screenings at the youth center and provides information on health issues, such as AIDS, tobacco use, and alcohol and drug abuse.

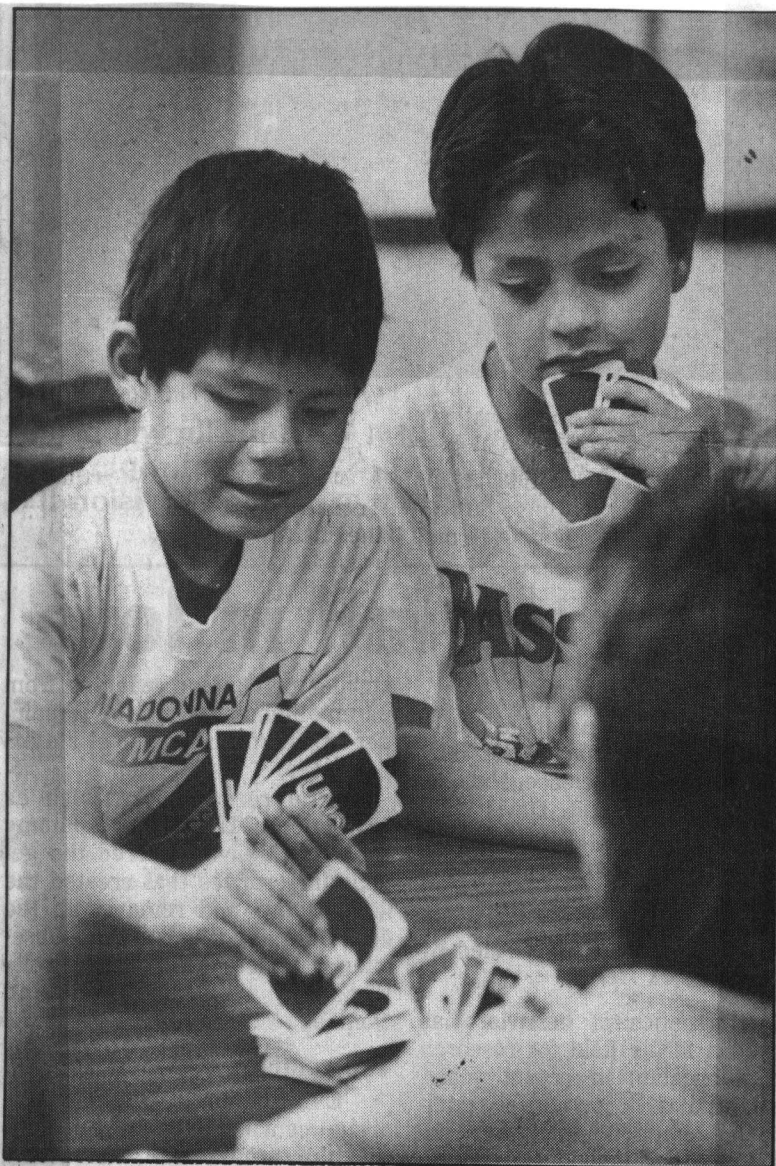
Fenix Services provides youth counseling and family counseling at the youth center. It also operates an after school program through its Pajaritos program, which has a small office in the building.

Edith Hernandez and Francisco Ramirez, who run the Pajaritos program, said kids often bring their homework and the staff provides tutoring. The program has two computers, which are in the process of being upgraded with additional software and hardware. The computers now include software for word processing and playing several computer games.

The students, most of whom are in elementary and middle school, use the computers for writing assignments. Ramirez said students can learn to use WordPerfect and Windows software programs.

The program sees about 25 kids a week, some of whom are regulars. One girl, Hernandez said, comes everyday, and when she is going to be a little late, calls the staff to inform them.

Pajaritos also conducts field trips, Hernandez said. Field



Enjoying a game of 'Uno' at the Youth Center are, from left, Noe Martinez, 8, and Gilbert Delgado, 11.

trips include visits to museums, planetariums, and the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Hernandez said.

"We want to show them that there's other stuff besides what they see on the streets," Hernandez said.

The center, which cost \$1.5 million, had a rather inauspicious beginning. A heated public debate erupted over the naming of the youth center. Two camps formed, one supporting Rodriguez, the other backing Hoularis.

Hoularis, who died in 1983, worked with area youth for many years and was affectionately called "Dad" by many Watsonville youths.

Rodriguez was a long-time Watsonville community activist. He was one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the city that went all the way to U.S. Supreme Court. The lawsuit brought district elections to Watsonville in 1989.

Rodriguez died in 1992.

A third faction — much larger than the first two and more vocal — also formed. This faction wanted the city to name the building after United Farm Workers Union founder Cesar Chavez, who died in 1993.

In the end, the City Council agreed on the center's present name.

For more information about the youth center call 728-6169.