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[Youth summit aims to instill pride, purpose](#)

- Emily Wilson, Special to The Chronicle
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The 10th Annual Youth Summit being held today at Half Moon Bay's I.D. E.S. Hall will be a little different than in years past.

Not that there has been anything wrong with the summit over the last nine years. Hundreds of middle and high school students from San Mateo County's coastal towns have participated in the summit, and because of their ideas and efforts, Half Moon Bay now has a skate park, a Green Ribbon Program that rewards kid-friendly businesses, peer counselors at the high school, teen concerts and a yearly lowrider car show.

Not bad for a place where the perception is there is nothing for teenagers to do.

So the organizers of the summit aren't trying to mess with success. There will still be about 100 kids from Half Moon Bay and Pescadero high schools and from Cunha Intermediate and Sea Crest, a private elementary and intermediate school in Half Moon Bay. High school students will lead the groups.

But this year, instead of dividing the kids into groups to talk about issues like "Drugs and Alcohol," "Friends and Relationships" or "Sex and Pregnancy," each group will be responsible for coming up with something to do for a month of the year. Some of the projects will be for one month, such as a food drive, but others could be continuous, such as a concert series.

The kids will leave the summit with 11 identified projects, as well as deadlines and contacts to help them get the projects done.

Susan Alvaro, the director of the Coastside Collaborative, which sponsors the summit, also hopes some kids will be inspired to take it further and go to some of the elected officials in town and ask for a youth advisory commission.

This idea came from Marsenne Torchia, a freshman at Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, who has been involved in the youth summit since she was in seventh grade.

"Everything we talk about relates back to 'Well, we have nothing else to do on the Coastside, so why not do drugs or have sex,' " said Torchia, a Half Moon Bay High

graduate. "So we thought we should just focus on coming up with things to do, and everyone could get involved first-hand."

Those involved with planning the summit welcome the new format.

"It's more outcome-based rather than issues-based," said San Mateo County Sheriff's Lt. John Quinlan. "It's a pretty tough world we're in right now, so if you want to look at 'well, how do I stop this war,' that's hard to do. We want to help them get some attainable goals, so when they're my age they can say, 'Hey, I did that,' and think of the power of one."

Alvaro is also glad for the change in focus. "I don't want to have another kids' 'get-together and kvetch' session," she said. "For nine years, they've been telling us what's wrong and we've been listening, and we should act like we heard them."

Scott Cowen, a junior at Half Moon Bay High School, agrees that the big problem for kids on the Coastside is not having enough to do. He will be leading a group at this year's summit and he looks forward to hearing other teens talk about their ideas.

"The community doesn't think of the kids," he said. "They only think of the adults and only try and make the community look nice to people moving in. There is nowhere for kids to go in town and nothing really to do."

Besides meeting other kids, Cowen likes it that in the afternoon when the facilitators report what their groups came up with, government officials, community leaders and business owners are there to hear what the kids have to say.

"(Last year) the fire chief and a lot of important people in the town were there to listen," he said. "I enjoyed talking directly to some of the bigger people in the town and telling them what we came up with."

Quinlan agrees that it's important for adults to listen to kids for a change.

"I'm a police commander out here, and it's real easy to take charge all the time," he said. "That's what people expect us to do. It's real easy to say,

'This is how you do it.' The kids have taught us it's important to be good listeners. It's a good reality check. When you have a 14-year-old or a 15-year-old kid sitting there trying to be a problem-solver, it's good to see."

Keeping the kids involved in their community is important enough to Sheriff Don Horsley that he has found the money to fund the summit, even in the face of budget cutbacks, Quinlan said.

"He sees it as crime prevention," Quinlan said. "He wants them to have a voice in the community, so they can take control and don't have to be controlled by others."

For Mandy Clothier, the coordinator of the computer clubhouse at Moonridge, an affordable housing complex, attending the summit and seeing the kids she works with in different roles was eye-opening.

"It's a really authentic way of giving kids a voice in changing their community," she said. "It's incredible to see how empowered they are."

The summit is not just for kids on student council or the ones who get the best grades, said Amanda Burr, a senior at Half Moon Bay High who has been involved with the summit since her freshman year. Hearing from other kids has been as important to her as expressing her ideas to adults.

"I felt out of the loop before," Burr said. "I feel a lot better about myself and a lot more aware of what is going on in the community rather than my own little friend group. It's really a positive experience."

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