

Making college a reality in Richmond

SOME COLUMN topics just tug at my heartstrings, and this is one of those.

Maybe it is because I have my youngest going off to college this summer. Maybe it is because a lot of us take sending our children off to college for granted, and "going to college" is something a lot of kids in our community assume will happen as well.

However, until a few years ago, college was a distant dream for some Richmond students. A friend recently told me about a program for kids at Richmond High School called College is Real that helps students who play soccer "acquire life skills so they can qualify for college."

Services offered by College is Real include tutoring, an English writing course, a mentor program, college trips, scholarships, guest speakers, college applications, SAT preparation and counseling.

The program was founded by Alamo resident Brad Blake, co-founder and chief executive of Blake-Hunt Ventures, a Danville-based real estate development and services company.

I exchanged e-mails with Blake, and he informed me a fundraiser for the program will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. Tuesday at the new Amaranta restaurant in the Rose Garden in Danville — which was built by Blake-Hunt Ventures on the corner of Sycamore Valley Road and Camino Ramon. The cost is \$50 per person, which includes drinks, food and live music.

Blake said he came up with the idea for the program a few



CATERINA MELLINGER
Around Alamo

years ago when he learned from Monte Vista High School soccer coach Fred Wilson that the boys on the Richmond High soccer team and their fans demonstrated remarkable sportsmanship after losing to Monte Vista in the North Coast Section playoffs.

Blake, who has coached youth soccer for 15 years, was so impressed that he contacted the Richmond High soccer coach, Rene Siles, and they discussed the need to help the players succeed in the classroom as well.

Blake sent me a copy of the first edition of the College is Real newsletter, in which he writes about wanting to improve the lives of kids by helping them get a college education.

"I was impressed by the positive attitudes of the kids in the soccer program, their work ethic and their commitment to the team," he said. "We believed those qualities could be transferred to the classroom and life in general. The kids are respectful, appreciative and eager to please,"

he wrote.

The director of College is Real is a former Richmond High School student, Daniel Ponce, 25. Ponce writes in the newsletter that when he attended high school, not many graduates went on to college. Neither had anyone in his own family.

"I never once had anyone to talk to me about college, let alone life after high school," Ponce wrote. "Most of my cousins either ended up in a gang, in jail or with a family at a very young age."

Ponce talks about finding a job and working right after high school, but knowing in his heart that he was capable of accomplishing much more than the opportunities his job offered. That feeling eventually led him to enroll at Contra Costa College, from which he graduated with associate's degrees in business administration and liberal studies.

Ponce is currently a student at Cal State East Bay, majoring in business administration.

Blake is a mentor to Ponce and three other students.

"Daniel was referred to me by Rene, who coached him," Blake wrote. "I was talking to Rene about the need to have a part-time director on campus and he immediately recommended Daniel. This was serendipity. He has been involved with CIR for a year and has been instrumental in its success. His presence on campus helps to hold the kids

accountable and also gives them a positive role model and someone they can talk to."

The program recently had its first graduating class of eight seniors. Six of them will be attending four-year universities and two will attend junior college.

He said the next challenge will be to get the kids to stay in college and then return to become mentors and role models for kids in the program.

Stop by Amaranta on Tuesday and have a great time while supporting a wonderful cause. All proceeds will benefit College is Real.

The CIR Web site, www.collegeisreal.org, has additional information about the program.

A parting thought from Blake: "I hope that the Danville-Alamo soccer community and others who want to help some well-deserving kids who face a lot of adversity in their daily lives achieve their dream of attending college attend the event on June 3 or make a donation."

Keep up the great work!

Reach Caterina Mellinger at aroundalamo@hotmail.com or by mail in c/o the Times, P.O. Box 607, Pleasanton, CA 94566.

www.westcoastwindowsanddoors.com