

Top speaker takes stage to keep kids on the right path

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Nearly 200 people on Monday turned out at the Henry J. Mello Center for the Performing Arts to learn a variety of tactics to keep juvenile delinquents out of juvenile hall in Santa Cruz County.

And they received a great deal of help from Jerry Tello, a nationally renowned speaker and Los Angeles native who tells stories and fables on stage to get his point across.

He incorporates music and poetry and theatrical performances to captivate the audience, but the messages in the end are clear cut, and there's always a moral to be gleaned from all of them.

His style is reminiscent of Edward James Olmos, with that Chicano flair that mixes Spanish and English while serving up a bit of comedy by poking innocent fun at Mexican culture.

Such as ... how leftovers are a big deal to the Mexican people because many are poor and have to make do with what they've got.

And in the end necessity is the mother of invention.

"That's what our people did," he told the audience of mostly service providers who work with juvenile delinquents. "We chopped up leftovers and made salsa, and now salsa is more popular than ketchup."

The one-day seminar was sponsored by Reclaiming Futures, a nonprofit group that is trying to help change the manner in which the juvenile justice system functions in Santa Cruz County, thanks to a \$1.2 million grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

According to Yolanda Perez-Logan, project director for the Santa Cruz-based group, four out of five youth who enter the juvenile justice system across the country have substance abuse problems. And, in the last 10 years, there has been a 144 percent increase in drug abuse arrests nationwide and a 291 percent increase in the number of youth who are incarcerated for some sort of drug involvement.

Yet only 10 percent of the children ever receive drug treatment.

And the root of the problem usually can be traced to the home, Perez-Logan said.

Enter Tello, 52, who believes that dignity, respect, love and trust are essential ingredients to heading off problems at the pass between parents and their children.

David Bouley, a commissioner with the Santa Cruz County Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Commission, said Tello's performance is the best he has ever seen.

"I had my wonders going into this," he said, "but this has got to be one of the best presentations I've ever seen."

Tello, who makes a living on the lecture circuit as it concerns "family strengthening," will still be in the Pajaro Valley for the next couple weeks.

He'll be working more closely with the service providers today and Wednesday, fine tuning what he already taught at Monday's seminar, giving them more of a hands-on approach.