

## Oakland rec center serves as glue for Asian community

By KALW News on June 17, 2010 at 2:43 PM

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Chinatown's Lincoln Recreation Center is a hub of activity for young people – it's one of the most popular outdoor spaces for youth in Oakland. In fact, many community leaders say demand for the space has outgrown capacity. KALW's Jennifer Courtney visited the rec center.

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JENNIFER COURTNEY: It's a typical Friday afternoon, and the park is full – some young men are shooting hoops while others talk in clusters. On the busiest days more than 100 middle and high school aged kids flock here. Most of them are Asian American – some immigrants, others born here. Many don't speak English well, and some have dropped out of high school.

If you're not paying attention, you might not notice that one person at the park is not a teenager. Sixty-nine-year-old Darlene Lee is picking up trash along the periphery. Now and then, one of the teens will call out to her.

DARLENE LEE: Hey, how you doing today.

STUDENT: Good.

Lee is just as much of a fixture at Lincoln as the kids are. She's a longtime community activist who's found her calling mentoring these teens. One of them is Tony -Lee says he doesn't work or go to school. Instead, he comes here every day.

STUDENT: "Hey Ms. Lee..."

In the half hour I'm on the basketball courts, he calls out to Lee several times for attention.

LEE: He'll just keep saying things to me just to get me to say something to him. And this is how many of my teens are.

You'll notice she says "*my* teens." Lee is a mother figure to many young people who hang out here and she says she feels responsible for them.

LEE: I try to yell at them and scold them as if they were my children. And a lot of them call me mom or grandma. And like when they write me letters, they'll say oh, I miss you grandma, you know things like that. Sometimes I think I'm the only adult that ever listens to them, or that they can communicate with.

ANNE HUANG: Darlene In our community is really known as the Chinatown elder who works with youth.

Anne Huang is the former head of the Oakland Asian Cultural Center. She says the teens who hang out at Lincoln Park might not be getting the kind of support Lee provides – anywhere else.

HUANG: A lot of these parents are just working all the time, even when they're at home they're exhausted and preoccupied with supporting their families in this foreign country. They also come from a culture where you're not supposed to talk to your kids about feelings.

LEE: If I can listen to the kids and help them work out their problems, that's what I'm here for.

Darlene Lee has been here all her life. She grew up in Chinatown and went to Lincoln Elementary School, which is right across the street from Lincoln Park. She played here at the rec center as a child.

LEE: They would show us how to make pancakes and waffles, the American types of foods since all of us were growing up with Chinese foods. So the park was very important, the directors instilled some new values in us that we didn't get from home.

Lee says she's trying to do that for these young people, in her own way. Picking up trash is not in her job description. She does it to remain visible – so the kids know she is there to talk... or to break up a fight. Her official title is recreation supervisor. Weekdays she answers the phone in the tiny office, checks out badminton equipment, helps with after school programs, even cleans the bathrooms. But for Lee, the main point is to be there for the teenagers – many of whom have committed crimes.

LEE: I try to get into their lives and talk to them, and try to convince them you know there is a way out, that you don't always have to fight. And I have been guilty of probably being too lenient on the kids, but I just look at it this way: If I call the police on them every single time, then the police and their relationship is going to be horrible, the parents are going to have to find ways to bail them out, and you know, sometimes if I could just gain their trust, and they can understand that someone really cares, maybe they'll think about it and not do something wrong.

But that doesn't always work. Lee says several of these young people have formed gangs and gone to juvenile hall for such offenses as armed robbery, car theft and home invasion. She says the kids' reputation for being dangerous might explain why many of her peers are afraid of them.

LEE: I think everyone thinks I'm crazy to be working here. Most people my age would rather be traveling or hanging out with other old people. But to me, I feel my calling is to be here with the teens and I have no interest hanging out with a bunch of old people.

There are some older people who use Lincoln Park in the mornings. They come take Tai Chi and other classes at the gym... but in general, they don't interact much with the teenagers here. And community leader Anne Huang says that's not surprising.

HUANG: What I observe in Chinatown is an ever-widening gap between the generations.

But Huang is hopeful that can change. And Darlene Lee is part of what gives her that hope. By maintaining a supportive environment for the teens at Lincoln Park, Huang says, Lee is helping solve the problem.

HUANG: I feel that geographically Oakland Chinatown is one of those rarer places where people of all generations can congregate, feel safe to interact with one another and therefore access a vehicle to bridge the gaps between the generations.

Eventually, Darlene Lee will have to retire, but she says she'll still come back to be with "her teens" as long as she can.

In Oakland, I'm Jennifer Courtney for Crosscurrents.

This story is part of a series on **Oakland's Chinatown**.

<http://blog.sfgate.com/kalw/2010/06/17/oakland-rec-center-serves-as-glue-for-asian-community/>