

Park mom helps kids navigate life

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OAKLAND — By all appearances, Darlene Lee, 64, is an unlikely park bouncer, with her slim frame and short-cropped haircut. She dresses casually in jeans and a fleece jacket and wears jade-green bangle bracelets.

But on a recent sunny afternoon at Lincoln Square Recreation Center, a park in Oakland's Chinatown, she stood ready to jump in the middle of a fight about to break out between two dozen Asian-American teenagers.

The teenagers gathered around a wooden replica of a pirate ship anchored in the sand. But before a punch was thrown, the altercation was stopped by Lee, an Oakland Parks and Recreation employee, who runs between the feuding teens and defuses the brawl.

"They come here and they really don't want to fight, but they have to," Lee said. "And so by putting on this big show and by having us scream at them, 'Get out of here,' they'll leave."

Such is the unwritten code when working with these teens, Lee said. The kids don't want to lose face, and they know she will stop the fight.

For more than 20 years, Lee has been the park mother for the youth who hang out at Lincoln Square Recreation on 10th and Harrison streets in the heart of Chinatown.

She is a part-time recreation leader, expected to teach sports and arts and crafts to community members who use the park.

But Lee goes beyond the call of duty, said Gilbert Gong, director of recreation at Lincoln Square. She also acts as an informal "social worker (and) parole officer, checking on the kids to make sure they are straight," he said.

Lee's coworkers instinctively turn to her when a fight breaks out; they see how the teenagers are highly protective of her and will not risk injuring her.

"The guys (teens) always warn her, 'You need to say away from this stuff, let's take care of business,'" Gong said. "Mrs. Lee's comment to them is, 'I'm there looking out

for you guys, I don't want anything to happen.'”

As a lifelong resident of Oakland's Chinatown, Lee grew up in an isolated community that was almost exclusively Chinese.

The teens she works with today represent a new generation of Asian-American immigrants living in Oakland: They are Chinese, but also Cambodian, Laotian, Mien and Vietnamese.

Some are high school dropouts and have difficulty holding jobs. “Wannabee” gang members, Lee says, who she finds “special.”

“We're hella' comfortable with her,” said Aaron, a tall 18-year-old. “She can talk to us. Tell us about life. How things are.”

Fights are rare at Lincoln Square these days, said Gong, but the surrounding Chinatown business owners have long disapproved of the teenagers who hang out at the park.

“They see it as harboring fugitives,” Gong said.

Gong said the community often fails to recognize the center's role as a surrogate family to these teens, who confront cultural clashes with their immigrant parents who hold on to traditions from their home countries.

“Just think where these kids will be if we weren't out here working with them, giving them a chance, helping them through the court system, helping them get their GEDs, helping them get into colleges,” Gong said.

Lee has that “special gift,” said Gong, in working with the community. She memorizes all their names and knows where they go to school.

“I try to put trust between my kids and myself,” Lee said. “I don't want them to think every time I'm just going to call the cops on them. So it's a different kind of rapport I'm trying to build with these kids.”

Lee explained that flexibility is key when working with teenagers, otherwise they would be disciplined constantly.

“What good does it do every time they go to jail?” Lee asked. “They are only locked up a few hours and then they're out. They just cause more problems for their parents.”

Lee remembers the Oakland Chinatown of her childhood, when community ties were strong. “If we got into trouble, everybody heard about it because they knew who your kids were.”

Today, the teenagers who hang out at the park come from all over, she said, and their parents don’t know the staff.

Lee attended Chinatown’s Lincoln Elementary School, next to Lincoln Square, and rarely ventured outside Chinatown. She played on an Asian-only basketball league and attended dances on weekends at the community center.

Life is different now, Lee said. As first-generation immigrants, today’s Chinatown teens are often forced to take on a parental role because they are better English speakers than their parents.

“The teens come around just to get her attention,” said Willie Davis Jr., a recreation leader at Lincoln Square. “They don’t get enough at home.”

Lee said she takes great pride when the kids who used to hang out at the park come back and visit her as adults.

“I think that’s the biggest kick I get out of it, (is) the kids still remembering me. They have something positive to share with me.”

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