

## Saving & Changing Lives in Northern California

**T**he Amer-I-Can Program was

first introduced to myself and Valerie Arce by John Mumford and Leon Taft in May, 2006. We toured high crime areas in Richmond and visited Richmond High School. Through a relationship with Darryl 'Coach D' Robinson, a partnership was formed between Amer-I-Can and Richmond High School. During the summer of 2006, Jim Brown and members of I-Can toured Richmond High School and gave a presentation to the principal, Orlando Ramos, Mayor Genoveva Garcia-Calloway and Councilmember Leonard McNeil from the City of San Pablo and other city organizers.

The Amer-I-Can curriculum has been taught to two groups of 15 students during 5th and 6th period during the 2006-2007 school year at Richmond High School. The first graduation at Richmond High will be held in June. The students are very excited. Many of the surrounding schools are requesting the program. The word is out and Amer-I-Can is in. Additionally, we have conducted violence intervention and prevention at Richmond High, Helms Middle and Adams Middle Schools in collaboration with Bay Area PeaceKeeper (BAP), Officer Danny Harris (Richmond Police Department), school cite supervisors and city/county and state officials. Principal Ramos, Vice-Principal Deleone and staff members acknowledge the attitude and behavioral changes since the arrival of Amer-I-Can.

The aforementioned progress, in my opinion, is also a result of the work being done by the great staff and

volunteers we are blessed with. Valerie Arece (I-Can/BAP Facilitator), is the backbone to our Richmond High group. She is from Richmond and understands what it is like to be at-risk. I've mentored Valerie since she was 14 years old. She worked at San Quentin State prison for eight years. She had a legendary reputation at San Quentin; she was the only 'free' staff that could walk anywhere in the institution and get respect. She is now a transitional case manager for highly violent offenders returning to the City of Oakland.

I mentioned earlier the blessing of having a great staff and volunteers; the following people continue making invaluable contributions to our implementation of the program. Diamond King, an Amer-I-Can/Young Life Facilitator, is having great success teaching the curriculum at Robertson High in Richmond and McClymonds High in Oakland. Mario Gonzalez, an

I-Can Facilitator comes from the San Francisco Mission District and in addition to teaching the curriculum is attending college. Anthony (Shadow) Richard, I-CAN/BAP, has went from gang life and incarceration to sharing the Amer-I-Can experience with school kids and community residents. Maria (Looney) Romero, I-CAN/BAP, was a teen mother and gang member who now gives, instead of takes from her community.

We just started teaching the curriculum at Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley and have been approved to continue in the 2007-2008 school year. We are indebted to Principal Kit Pappenheimer, who wrote the grant to fund the program. Rosina Karen, who once mentored and hired me to work at Familias Unidas in gang intervention, is responsible for our access to this school. The students have embraced the staff and have intimated how they look forward to our class each week.

In the Mission District of San Francisco we are fortunate to have as a Facilitator Joseph (Joe Drama) Robles. He works in three juvenile detention centers at Hill Crest in San Mateo, Log Cabin Boys Ranch in San Francisco, Youth Guidance Center (YGC) San Francisco – in collaboration with Young Life For Youth/By Youth, and United Playaz. Dominic Blanks (ICAN/ Young Life/For Youth By Youth Facilitator) is contributing through intervention and prevention on the streets of San Mateo; he also runs a class at the 49ers Academy. Reports from the teachers of the students he is teaching the curriculum, grades are up and disciplinary actions down. Dominic is teaming with Doug Fort and Heather Starnes from Young Life/For Youth By Youth to acquire funding for 40 students at Hoover School and 20 students at Kennedy Middle School in Redwood City. The collective efforts of the aforementioned individuals is truly saving and changing lives in the cities of Northern California.