

Vecinos Unidos turns ten

By Gregg MacDonald
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Times staff photo/ Gregg MacDonald From left, Christopher Gonzalez, 11, Jordy Garcia, 8, and Jorkean Escobar, 13, having fun during the 10th anniversary celebration of Vecinos Unidos/ Neighbors United at the Herndon Neighborhood Resource Center on Tuesday, April 17.

Birthday parties for 10-year-olds are usually replete with excited children and lots of birthday cake, and last week's 10th anniversary party for Vecinos Unidos was no exception.

As children ate cake and ice cream, adults talked among themselves and reminisced about the organization's evolution.

Vecinos Unidos, or Neighbors United, which addresses the educational needs of local youth, was founded April 17, 1997, by Herndon community leaders Darryl Smith, Jorge Rochac, and Les Watts.

According to Smith, who is now captain of the Purcellville Police Department, the organization began without a budget in an unoccupied apartment of the Elden Terrace apartment complex.

Smith said that he, Rochac and Watts were original members of the Hispanic Community Task Force charged with identifying and resolving critical concerns within Herndon's Hispanic community.

In an effort to address youth educational needs, they created an after-school homework assistance program in an apartment office donated by Herndon Terrace manager Amelia White.

"The first night we started, we had two children, Smith said. "By the end of the week, we had 50. Ms. White told us that, 'This was not going to work.'"

Smith said White instead let the organization use an unoccupied three-bedroom apartment and, in 2001, the organization began using the Herndon Neighborhood Resource Center.

Originally formed to address the needs of Hispanic students, the program expanded to assist all children in need of homework assistance.

In 2001, Vecinos Unidos was awarded a five-year grant from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation.

Four years later, Vecinos Unidos received an additional grant from the Eisenhower Foundation to establish a youth Safe Haven in Herndon.

The program, located in a Parkridge Gardens apartment, provides youth in grades 1-12 with a safe place to go after school.

At Safe Haven, students receive homework assistance and adult and police mentoring. Students also have the opportunity to listen and talk with guest speakers and take part in summer activities.

Last year, according to president Barbara Sorenson, Vecinos Unidos had 90 students registered in its programs.

Smith said that one of the organization's very first child participants, Centreville High School senior Alex Ruiz, recently applied to the Fairfax County Police Department's burgeoning cadet program.

"That just makes me feel so good," Smith said.