

# CONNECTIONS

VOLUME 3, NUMBER 4

www.makingconnectionsdenver.org

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## 2003 Learning Awards Presented

Though she spoke no English, Lan Pham began attending Sun Valley Coalition meetings three years ago to meet new people and learn more about what was going on in her neighborhood. Because the coalition meetings include interpreters for monolingual Vietnamese and Spanish speakers, Pham and other non-English speakers feel welcome.



**Lan Pham of the Sun Valley Coalition was one of five recipients of the 2003 Making Connections' Learning Awards.**

In the course of three years, Pham, a single mother of three, went from learning to leading, becoming a great role model for her Vietnamese community, says fellow coalition member, Phuonglan Nguyen.

Sun Valley activist Phil Kaspar said that beyond effectively representing the Vietnamese of her neighborhood, Pham has become an asset to the whole community. Undaunted by adopting a new country and a difficult language, she's "an impressive person without being forceful because she has overcome those things," he said.

For these reasons, Pham was one of five recipients of the second annual Supporting Learning Awards presented by the Making Connections' Community Learning Network.

Other recipients who received their awards at a celebration held on Dec. 8 were The Piton Foundation, and Cec Ortiz, former site coordinator of Making Connections—Denver. Also receiving the annual awards were the members of the Future Committee at Cole Middle School and the Voices Heard Committee at West High School.

### Voices Heard Committee and Cole Future Committee

"My goal is for students to begin being part of the school," said youth organizer Gabriela Jacobo, who presented Learning Awards to the Voices Heard Committee at West High School and the Cole Middle School Future Committee.

"They know what's best for them, even though they're inexperienced. Right now we're making decisions for them, but I don't think we're listening to them directly. I don't think we're making them part of the solution."

But through these two youth organizing groups, students at Cole and West are now beginning to have a say in what happens at their schools. In May, the 7th and 8th graders from Cole held a public

#### 2003 Learning Awards

- Lan Pham, Sun Valley Coalition
- Voices Heard Committee, West High School
- Cole Future Committee, Cole Middle School
- Cec Ortiz
- The Piton Foundation

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# New Justice for Cole Youth, Community

*Making Connections' Goal: Children feel safe in their schools, homes and communities.*

Cole's new community court aims to take responsibility for crime in the neighborhood, wrapping its arms around victims and youthful offenders alike.

Launched Sept. 5 by the Cole Community Justice Council, the court at Clyburn Village moves from the traditional crime-and-punishment model toward restorative justice, which focuses on healing for the community, the victim and the offenders.

"This whole concept is the wave of the future for every neighborhood and every city," said Steve Reemts, a Cole Community Justice Council member based at St. Martin Plaza. "Calls are coming in from all over the United States."

The National Radio Project covered the court's first day, which scheduled five juveniles. Less than two months later, more than 20 youth who live in or committed such offenses as vandalism or shoplifting in 80205 now fill the court's docket every Friday morning.

his case goes to a trial, the old fashioned way. "If a kid says, 'OK, I did it, I'm willing to go to a diversion program,'" that's where restorative justice kicks in.

Court personnel and community members determine likely candidates for diversion in a community accountability meeting. David Mrakitsch, Community Justice Coordinator for the District Attorney's Community Accountability Board program, gave this pre-court example from the DA's juvenile diversion initiative:

"We had two young kids who stole a car together, 14 years old," Mrakitsch said. The two went before the board for pre-screening where they talked about what happened and demonstrated (or not) a sense of responsibility for what they did.

"One of the kids at the conference was really good, really taking responsibility. You could tell he felt badly about what he did, his parents were really supportive.

"However, his co-defendant comes dressed all in red, he's fixing the crease in his pants, checking his pager, he's not engaged. We get to the point about what actually happened and his response was, 'Well, I didn't actually drive the car, so I'm not guilty. I don't even know why I'm here.'"

Co-defendant number one goes to diversion, meets the 3-year-old son of the family whose car was stolen and with it his toys, presents the boy with toys he purchased from lawn mowing money and talks to him about what a mistake stealing the car was. Co-defendant number two goes back to court.

Community Court Planner Loree Greco said the Denver community court's other groundbreaking aspect is unheard-of collaboration and cooperation among disparate agencies. "We're seeing real systems change," she said. "The community court has brought in a number of stakeholders including faith-based initiatives, Denver Public Schools, Denver Health, Denver Human Services, the

District Attorney's office, the Denver Police Department and non-profits."

Sandy Douglas, a community resident involved with the court and head of the Cole Neighborhood Organizing Alliance agrees. "The Denver Community Court is about community involvement, community decision-making and community direction in partnership with systems."



**A new community court in Cole involves community residents in the sentencing of youth who live in the 80205 zip code or commit offenses in this area.**

Starting at 8:30 a.m., families stream through Clyburn Village's doors at 32nd Avenue and Downing where artwork, community members and friendly court personnel give them the idea this is not going to be a regular court experience, even if English isn't their first language. Benita Muniz from District Attorney Bill Ritter's office is there to greet Spanish-speaking parents and children, explain the process and make them feel at home.

Denver County Court Presiding Judge Raymond Satter said the court's first incarnation was launched in May of 2000 to handle traffic ticket overflow from the city and county building.

The community court now is a blend of traditional and non-traditional protocols, Satter said. If a kid says he's innocent,



For more information about the Community Court in Cole, and other activities in Cole, go to [www.aboutcole.org](http://www.aboutcole.org)

# West High Students' Voices Are Heard

*Making Connections' Goal: Children and youth are educated, entering school ready to learn, succeeding in school and leaving school equipped to enter the world of work or succeed in higher education.*

Students from the Voices Heard committee at West High School won support from administrators, faculty and fellow classmates in September when they presented an action plan to include students in school decision making and to beautify their venerable facility.

Two auditorium presentations were necessary to accommodate the entire student body. The meetings were enthusias-

Eslynne Heusser said Voices Heard students decided to address AP class complaints first because they hoped to ensure those classes would be reinstated by the time school resumed in the fall. Indeed that happened and, so encouraged, committee members launched another initiative, to improve West's physical appearance.

Words are one thing, but Katherine Ludeman really captured everyone's attention with a series of slides. One, depicting an unflushed toilet in a student bathroom, brought gasps, followed by another slide of a pristine sink in a faculty facility.

"We were showing (faculty) what we see everyday in the bathroom," Ludeman said between presentations.

Katherine introduced an "adopt-a-hallway" idea for school organizations, suggested appropriate signs around the school — "Trash belongs in the trash can, not the ground!" — and proposed a recycling program. For his part, Vice Principal Patrick Sandoval said he would do his best to keep student toilets stocked with paper, towels and soap.

Principal Angela Bodenhamer agreed to monthly meetings with Voices Heard. Student representatives Jessica Hopkins and Cassandra Archuletta pledged to help research a recycling program, implement a student monitoring program to reduce vandalism and continue to advertise the beautification project.

It all began two years ago with an organizational meeting at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, said MOP youth organizer Jacobo. "Their main issue was youth involvement,"

she said. "Why are there no kids concerned about problems in the community?"

Making Connections funded the proposal for youth organizing, said Jacobo, who was in charge of youth story circles for Making Connections—Denver.

The value in organizing youth is that they start feeling equal, she said.

After sharing their voice, many young people then assume the next step is the organizer will solve their problems. Instead, they are pushed into research, she said. "They start having a taste of the solution. Suddenly, they're doing real hard work."



Read about other organizing activities on Denver's Westside at [www.aboutla-almalincolnpark.org](http://www.aboutla-almalincolnpark.org)



**Students from the Voices Heard committee at West High School won support from administrators, faculty and fellow classmates in September when they presented an action plan to include students in school decision making.**

tically received said youth organizer Gabriela Jacobo of Metro Organizations for People, who spearheads the youth work for Making Connections—Denver.

"You did this in a business-like manner — my hat is off to you," declared Area Superintendent Joseph Sandoval. Sandoval agreed to a Voices Heard request that he help set a follow-up meeting with Superintendent Jerry Wartgow to update him on the issues Voices Heard is tackling.

Voices Heard student Blanca Trejo facilitated the action; Casey Asimus described its history, which began with a survey taken last spring in which more than 300 students voiced concerns about a proposal to cut Advanced Placement (AP) science classes and about the poor physical condition of their school.

# Sun Valley Gets Police Storefront

*Making Connections' Goal: Children feel safe in their schools, homes and communities.*

A coming Denver police storefront will allow Sun Valley children to see officers helping people instead of hunting criminals on their neighborhood streets.

"We're hoping to create an opportunity for kids to meet with cops when they're not hunting for someone," said Sun Valley activist Phil Kaspar. Also, the Decatur Place-based storefront will make life easier for residents who no longer will have to travel to District 1 headquarters at 46th and Pecos to fill out police-oriented paperwork. A third of Sun Valley households don't have cars, Kaspar said.

When the storefront opens, Officer Martin Duran will spend approximately 16 hours a week there, including time on the streets.

But the Sun Valley Coalition's anti-crime activities started some time before the storefront. Members of the coalition, which is supported by Making Connections—Denver, met in January of 2000 with organizers from Metro Organizations for People, said Sister Kathleen Andrews, administrator of Decatur Place, which houses single parents and their children. "We looked at high crime rates and safety issues — those are the two things that drove this project," Andrews said.

Then Dist. 1 commander Brian Gallagher was invited to an "action" — as the public meetings are known. Though he told Andrews he could only give them 30 minutes, three hours later, he was still there, she said. "He really heard what we were saying."

Gallagher ordered a foot patrol and advised resident leaders how to tell which gang was leaving what graffiti. At the time, Northeast Denver Crips were trying to establish a "farm team" in Sun Valley, Kaspar said, but they never were able to get a foothold.

At one point, the coalition called Gallagher to ask for a substation in Sun Valley. "He said no, but then we started talking about storefronts," Andrews said.

After the breakdown of negotiations to locate a storefront next to a Denver Housing Authority laundry facility at Sun Valley Homes, the coalition opted to take over a space at Decatur Place, recently vacated by the Rude Park child care facility.

The coalition's efforts already are paying off.

Though 2002 statistics still ranked Sun Valley as Denver's most crime-ridden neighborhood, numbers from the first half of 2003 indicate crime there has dropped by a third compared to the same period a year before.

Though sounds of gunfire, including automatic rifle fire, were once common, Kaspar took a recent evening walk through the neighborhood. It was quiet, he said. Four or five teenaged couples were strolling the streets. "It just wasn't the same place anymore."



Read about other organizing activities in Sun Valley at [www.aboutsunvalley.org](http://www.aboutsunvalley.org)

2003 Learning Awards, continued from page 1

meeting — known as an "action" — to ask public and private organizations to partner with them to increase and expand after-school opportunities for youth, to which all agreed. Their request was based on a survey they did of 270 students who said having no place to go and nothing to do was their biggest complaint.

The Voices Heard Committee at West held their action before 1,700 cheering students, asking and getting promises from Denver Public Schools' administrators to consult with students before withdrawing advanced placement and accelerated classes. Further, they promoted a West High beautification campaign to include student bathrooms, which were in deplorable condition at the time.

The value in organizing youth is that they start feeling equal, said Jacobo. "They're not used to having a voice in the school. They're used to sometimes not having a voice in their families."

## Cec Ortiz

"Cec Ortiz is a catalyst," says Peg Logan, executive director of the Chinnok Fund, a major partner in Making Connections' work. "She attracts people to her. That's one of her gifts, that she brings people together to achieve things they wouldn't have been able to do individually," says Logan in describing Ortiz, who was the coordinator of Making Connections from its inception in 1999 until late this year.

Ortiz resigned as site coordinator in September when she accepted the position of director of the Mayor's Office of Workforce Development from Denver's recently-elected mayor, John Hickenlooper.

## The Piton Foundation

Accepting the award for Piton were foundation chairman Sam Gary and president Mary Gittings Cronin.

"It's not what you have, it's about what you do with what you have," said Candace RedShirt, a member of the Community Learning Network. "And Piton as a partner to our work has been an excellent example of that," said RedShirt in presenting the award.

As the primary philanthropic partner for Making Connections in Denver, Piton supports the initiative in a number of ways, including providing staff assistance. But its largest contribution is in funding the projects that come out of the neighborhood organizing. In 2003, the foundation invested approximately \$1.7 million in the Making Connections' neighborhoods.

"Piton has consistently supported efforts to help citizens come together to strengthen their neighborhoods," said Gittings Cronin. "Making Connections provides us with an avenue to make sure our investments are leveraged and based on an agenda that is community-driven."