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Temescal Canyon High School students enjoy weekly classroom lessons from experts, including COI founder Laura Huxley (right).

Teens and Toddlers Connect

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Photographs by AGUSTIN TABARES

Teen pregnancy is almost an embarrassment in terms of how it's plaguing America," says Elizabeth Crawford, executive director of Children Our Ultimate Investment (COUI), a non-profit organization for the nurturing of the "possible human."

"There are almost one million teen pregnancies each year, which is by far the highest in any industrialized country," Crawford continues. "It's a problem because a child is being born to a person who is radically unprepared, and it often touches off a downward spiral—poverty, limited education—severely limiting the potential of the teen herself."

That is the impetus for COUI's "Teens & Toddlers" program, which has brought its hands-on approach to parenting and adulthood to 24 students at Temescal Canyon High School. The program is also in effect in Pueblo De Los Angeles in East L. A., and the objective in both schools is to educate teens before they're facing an unwanted pregnancy.

"We teach a lot more than keeping your pants zipped," Crawford continues. "[The program] is about responsibility in all things—in relationships, responsibility to the community, to their school work and teachers, and responsibility as citizens of the world."

The program incorporates classroom work with twice-a-week visits to preschools at Palisades Presbyterian Church and Kehillat Israel.

"This program brings together the two ages that are the most egocentric—teens and toddlers," says Laura Huxley, who founded COUI in 1977. It is her feeling that the decision to create a new life is one of the most important ones we make in our lives, and it should not be left to chance. She believes that, "We ought to be loved before the beginning so we will love, too."

"These teens are extraordinary people; they are lively and want to learn," says Huxley, who, along with her husband, the late novelist Aldous Huxley, explored ways of proactively tapping the human

potential. "They have shown a great deal of enthusiasm. They have been given a lot of preaching [by others]—we give them information and experience. After two hours with the toddlers, they are exhausted; they come into contact with someone more egocentric than themselves."

As Vicente Garcia pushes Reilly Burns on a swing at the Presbyterian Nursery School play yard, you can feel the bond between the two. Reilly looks back over her shoulder with a huge smile. "Push me more," she says with a giggle.

"I'm not ready to be a parent," says 17-year-old Vicente. "I'm not prepared. I have to go to school, get a job. I've learned here that it's not just having kids; kids need love and acceptance."

Vicente says he was pleasantly surprised by how accepting the toddlers have been of him. "They get to know you better; it's not just how you dress, but who you are."

Interacting with toddlers and being seen through their eyes is "hard work, but sometimes it's easier than being with adults," says Tracy Cohen, 17. "I like to come here and play with the kids instead of dealing with teenage things. Just being a kid again is fun."

Having younger siblings at home doesn't necessarily prepare you for entering the world of parenthood. "I have a 3-year-old brother at home, but here I have learned how to play with kids and understand them," says Carlos Lopez. "You really have to listen to them. You have to play with all of them, but you have to pay attention to each of them. They each want all the attention. They will go, 'Carlos, Carlos,'" he says as he pulls on his shirt sleeve.

Carlos admits to being frustrated with the kids at times and being nervous when he first met them, "But after two days it was nice coming back." Now, after almost a semester, this 19-year-old realizes that before becoming a parent, "I have to think about what I want to do for myself, what

I want to accomplish. Then it will be time to have a nice family. I want two kids, a little boy and a little girl, when I'm 25 or 26."

Young voices fill the Purple Room at the Kehillat's Early Childhood Center. "We give thanks to God for bread," they sing as part of their Challah prayer. They sit around a table—teachers, toddlers and teens, sharing the Shabbat lunch—Challah bread and grape juice.

"They never get tired," says 18-year-old Jacob Cota, referring to his young friends. "You have to have a lot of energy to play with them. You always have to be happy; you have to leave your problems outside. Problems with school, friends, girlfriends. You can't be mean to them. That's not hard for me, but I know I'm not ready to have a baby at this time. They're cute, but it's hard to be a parent."

Olivier Morowati echoes this sentiment. "I used to think it would be easy to have a kid, but now I know you have to have a lot of compassion. You have to have a lot of love to have a kid," says the 17-year-old. "For your kids to have a happy life, you have to be someone. Anyone can have a kid, but you need to have the finances and the right teaching."

According to COUI Executive Director Crawford, "We teach [the teens] about child psychology and how a young child's world view is so vul-

nerable to the attitude of the adults around them so they understand how incredibly powerful the role of a parent is and they learn to take it extremely seriously. They realize they are not ready to be that, and that prods them into thinking about what they do want to be.

"It seems to me that for the first time someone has taken these kids seriously and given them responsibility, and they are blossoming."

They are also communicating—about relating to people in the present, and developing bonds in the future, Crawford says. In the high school classroom "We give them examples of an interaction between two people...and we have them act it out...and then we critique it. 'How could it have been done better?' And then together we draw conclusions about the best way to communicate, and we encourage them to take that into the [preschools] to work with the kids."

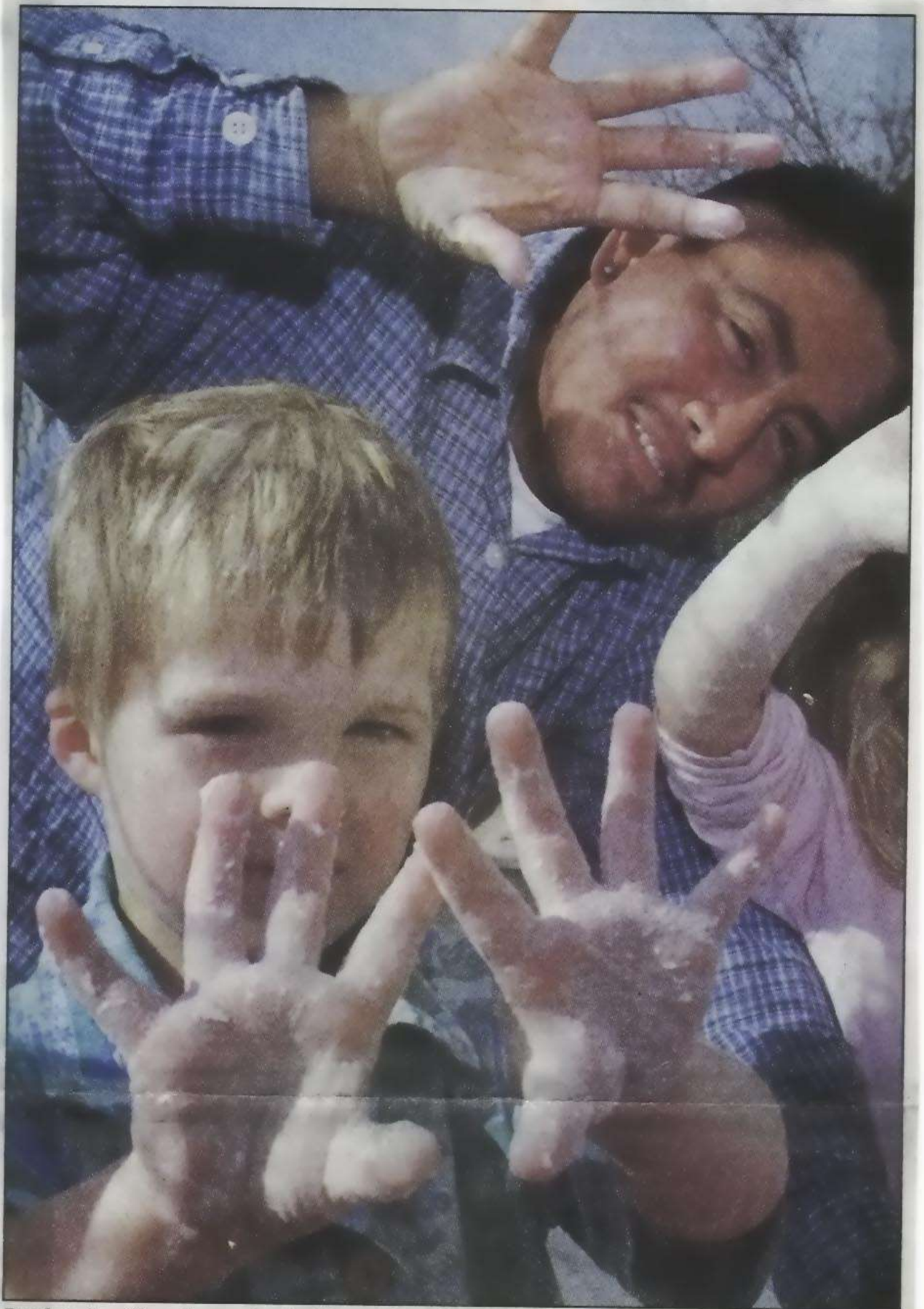
This teaching-by-example approach has been quite effective, according to Crawford. "They all get it, they all take it deeply to heart. Often the boys develop a new concept of what it means to be a man—how to be a good father, how to commit to a family and take care of them for all of their lives. I have heard the boys talking about protectiveness and providing and committing.

There is a real awareness for the traditional role of the father and a respect of that role."

The teens are not the only ones benefiting from this program. "This helps children develop a better self-image," says Fern Eisenberg, director of the Kehillat's center. "In order to develop a healthy self-esteem, [the toddlers] have to be able to interact with a lot of different types of people. The children benefit from their relationship with these teens who are different from them for any number of reasons—intergenerationally, ethnically. With this feeling of being comfortable with them, they learn to become comfortable with themselves in the world."

And then there's the more practical viewpoint. "The teenagers bring a different type of energy with them," says Donna Fry, director of the Presbyterian preschool. "In an environment where there are mainly women teachers, it has been beneficial to have the young men. They will slide down the slide 100 times, race with the children over and over again. The sandbox came alive like it never had before with those boys in it.

"Kids can make you feel like a million bucks, and this is what the toddlers have done for the teens. When the youngsters take your hand and want to be around you constantly, it makes you feel great. Young kids know when people are kind and these [teens] are kind."



Presbyterian Church preschooler Weston Cowell enjoys a hands-on lesson in measuring flour from Temescal High School student Carlos Lopez.



Preschooler Emily Oetzell shares a laugh and a hug with Tracy Cohen in the Presbyterian Church play yard.



Laura Huxley, founder of Children Our Ultimate Investment.



Adrian Ortiz (left) and Jacob Cota, Temescal High School students, take a break from their work with preschoolers at Kehillat Israel's Early Childhood Center.