

Fremont High students are hooked by geography program

Auto Club and UCLA combine to interest students in geography by studying the past of their neighborhoods.

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SPECIAL TO THE WAVE

SOUTH LOS ANGELES — A group of Fremont High School students have been hooked this semester. Hooked on the past of their surrounding neighborhood, that is.

The students received their blast from the past courtesy of Center X's History-Geography Project, the Automobile Club of Southern California, the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education and a young, energetic teacher.

"No way, that's not Broadway and Slauson," said Charlie Becerra, a 10th grader when shown a picture of the well-

known intersection that was taken more than 100 years ago.

Becerra was one of the students in Janet Tran's world history class at Fremont who were presented with pictures of neighborhoods that they were intimately familiar with.

Tran was among 21 teachers who attended UCLA History-Geography Project's Summer Institute, respectful of LAUSD's requirement of professional enhancement. The goal of the symposium was to increase history and geographic knowledge in inner-city students.

"The idea was to make it relevant and personal," said the History-Geography Project's co-director Mary Miller.

As a final exercise during the symposium, the teachers were charged with developing their own lesson plans using the Auto Club's archives. At their disposal were 30,000 maps, photographs and paintings documenting the past century of California's growth and development.

Tran latched on to the opportunity and used the archives to develop a prelude to her lesson:

"Then, Now and How, a Unit on the Industrial Revolution." The 10th graders used the maps, photographs and other images to compare and contrast the development of Los Angeles over the past century from a sleepy town in the horse-and-buggy age, into a world economic center. The approach proved unusually successful.

"It's been so far such a positive experience, because we've been able to get much more hands-on resources than we are usually able to get," Tran said. "It's really fascinating to them. And it's been much more of a hook than the textbooks. A lot more students would have dropped out if I had used the traditional curriculum. A lot of students that never turn in anything turned in projects. They were hooked into it."

Tran said that since many of her students have all sorts of negativity around them with none or very few positive role models, they

need to be hooked into a learning subject and convinced that education is the path.

"The classroom has to be the place that provides a positive and impacting experience and the 10th-grade year is pivotal in having them stick around and be sold on the idea of education so they don't fall into the ranks of the unknown," Tran said.

The Auto Club documents traffic conditions and has taken pictures depicting every part of the city for more than a century. "There's just not a big library of archives elsewhere," said historian Matthew Ross.

After considering what a unique resource the archives were, the Auto Club began looking for a way to utilize them for the benefit of students. So they contacted UCLA's Miller, who had once before used some maps and photographs for a project she was working on. And thus began the partnership that became the History-Geography Summer Institute.

The program, which benefited from a pre-existing grant from the federal government, focused on increasing geographic knowledge for teachers and students. Help also came from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education and the Auto Club.

"It was fantastic, I've got to tell you," said Auto Club's spokesperson Paul Gonzales. "I was moved to see those kids get so excited. They were hooked." Each organization that formed the partnership sat in on Tran's class to see the effect it had and was impressed by the outcome.

"We always felt that the Auto Club's archives were a unique resource but the issue was getting the materials into the hands of the students," Gonzales said. "We had the archives, UCLA had the expertise and the teachers had the students. It was a natural partnership."

"It wasn't necessary for us to go through the LAUSD. We only gave [the teachers] a different way to address the required curriculum."

lum," Miller said. "We're really excited about the outcome."

Miller said this method of supplementing lesson plans is helpful in inner-city schools and is in keeping with Center X's mission.

"The university didn't always think it was necessary to work with [kindergarten through 12th grade schools]," Miller said. "[We] do now, but they didn't in the past."

The History-Geography Project began in 1992 when education professionals addressed UCLA's Center X, a progressive educational group whose aims were providing rigorous, high-status professional education and racially improving urban schooling for Los Angeles' students. The educators combined their decades of teaching experience to come up with the program.

"I was a teacher for 39 years and my partners' experience is compatible," Miller said. "We also had the support of a few notables, that gave us a lot of credibility."