

# Riverside prepares for departure of influential adviser to youth council

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By DOUG HABERMAN

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RIVERSIDE - When Connie Leach began volunteering in 2003 with the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council, the panel had a history of modest achievements, such as a talent show.

"I didn't quite know what to do" with it, Mayor Ron Loveridge admitted.

But Leach did. She took over as the council's advisor in 2004 and the city renamed it the Riverside Youth Council.

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Under Leach, the panel launched a number of activities that have benefited youths, enriched the community and earned her and the city national recognition.

But now Leach is stepping down. Her last day will be May 16.

She is separated from her husband, Police Chief Russ Leach, and plans to return to the cooler climate of the Seattle area, where she grew up in a town on Puget Sound, she said.

"I've always wanted to go back," said Leach.

Loveridge said the city hopes to fill the part-time position by July.

**Achievements**

To move the youth council forward, Leach instituted an application process that guaranteed representation from every high school in the city.

She made all 26 members sign a contract committing to a full year of service to ensure they were not just there to pad their resumes, Leach said.

With her guidance, the council created:

The Multicultural Youth Festival (canceled this year for lack of money and because its Main Street pedestrian mall location is being renovated), which celebrates the cultures of countries around the globe.

Youth court, in which teens serve as jurors in the trials of first-time juvenile offenders charged with misdemeanors. Judges, the offices of the district attorney and the public defender, and police are all involved.

A Rock-A-Thon that takes place immediately after the Martin Luther King Jr. Walk-A-Thon, with music, information booths and food vendors.

The "25 Most Remarkable Teens in Riverside," which honors a diverse group of youths, from outstanding musicians to teens who have overcome tremendous adversity.

Leach saw to it that the youth council achieved results by guiding the members, but having them make key decisions and do much of the work, Loveridge said.

He called it combining structure with empowerment.

"I've never seen anybody connect the two as effectively as Connie Leach does," Loveridge said.

**Growing Leaders**

It's all about growing leaders, Leach said.

"They are able to experience success in roles they otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to participate in," she said.

Pamela Vasquez, 19, served two years on the council, first as co-chairwoman and then as chairwoman, and said Leach would throw out ideas for the council to work on, then let the council choose from among them. She would ride herd, with a mix of stressed-out cajoling and motherly affection, to make sure they carried through.

"She really made us feel like we did it on our own," said Vasquez, now in her second year as a business student at UC Riverside.

Kristina West, 21, also served two years on the youth council and said Leach's aspirations for the group were so high that members often thought, "Oh my God! She wants us to do that?"

But West, now a sociology student at Cal State San Bernardino, said that under Leach's tutelage, "all those things became possible."

**Recognition**

In 2007, Leach was one of 10 individuals honored by the National Child Labor Committee with its Lewis Hine Award for helping youths move toward self-sufficient and satisfying adulthoods.

And in January 2008, retired Gen. Colin Powell's nonprofit America's Promise Alliance named Riverside one of the 100 Best Communities for Young People thanks in large part to Leach's work.

Rose Mayes, who helps organize the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Walk-A-Thon, said Leach and the youth council helped boost participation of youths in the event thanks to the Rock-A-Thon.

Leach combines an engaging personality, a good attitude, a strong work ethic and solid organizational skills, along with a commitment to celebrating diversity, Mayes said.

"She can never be replaced," Mayes said. "Unless they have a clone of her."

*Reach Doug Haberman at 951-368-9644 or [dhaberman@PE.com](mailto:dhaberman@PE.com)*