

## The OMI Safe Haven – A Safe Place to Be

*By: Takija T. Gardner*

Imagine yourself walking in the shoes of a 16 year old who has never taken a high school course, who lives in a group home (due to being physically abused by a parent), who has self esteem issues, and who has experimented with drugs. Now tell me, how do you feel?

While I can't describe how you personally feel, I can tell you how the 16 year old feels. According to the youth, before being part of the OMI Safe Haven program, "I felt as if no one cared about if I was alive or dead ... all I ever did before being introduced to the program was getting in trouble, skip school, and hung out on the streets in my neighborhood until it was time for me to go into the house. I did not even know that there was a safe place for me to go to just hang out and be me."

Essentially, the OMI Safe Haven is just that, a safe place for youth to hang out after school, especially during the times that they are more inclined to get involved in or be a victim of violence.

Since the development of the OMI Safe Haven, dating back to 2003, youth and the residents of the OMI/Excelsior District have benefited from this diverse and very accessible program. Through the cultivation of partnerships that value, respect, and empower youth, families, and communities, the Safe Haven has been successful by providing much needed services to 100s of families each year.

At the OMI Safe Haven, youth participate in activities that foster academic achievement, improve life skills, promote cultural awareness, and offer leadership opportunities. The program also serves as a safe place for youth to hang out and gives them the opportunity to be successful in life, while facing everyday challenges.

What sets the OMI Safe Haven apart is that we focus on at-risk youth, ages 10 – 18, and provide them with wrap-around services in a structurally sound and safe place. We offer services that range from counseling (provided by the OMI Family Resource Center), to getting youth back on track in school (through the Truancy Intervention Program), and a number of other activities that provide support as needed. For example, remember the 16-year old presented at beginning of this article? Well, since being introduced to the OMI Safe Haven only a short period of time ago, he is now taking classes to get a GED. He regularly attends a number of workshops the OMI Safe Haven provides focusing on substance abuse, domestic violence, and sex education, and he's also involved in one of the Safe Haven's esteemed leadership groups that foster community development.

You see, the OMI Safe Haven is what it says it is; a safe place that is developing and empowering youth to make positive strides in today's ever changing society. If young people can't go to the Safe Haven, then where will they go? Let us not play the game of Monopoly with our youth, where it is '*skip go and go straight to jail*'. Let us continue to make dreams



and possibilities become realities through our quest of building a world of opportunity for the youth in San Francisco.

*The OMI Safe Haven is located in the Minnie and Lovie Ward Recreation Center in the OMI. The program is open from 2:00pm to 8:00pm during the school year and all day in the summer. Please consider contributing to Urban Services YMCA so that we may continue providing critically needed services to the community. If you would like to learn more about the OMI Safe Haven, please contact Takija Gardner, OMI Safe Haven Director, at 415-587-3217.*