

Mt. Tallac students prove importance of alternative ed

By Kathryn Reed

A sense of pride fills the students as they give adults tours of the school. They talk about their campus with enthusiasm. They know the answers to every question asked.

Starting in the hallway at Mount Tallac High School is a wall of student photos. They are part of the three A's. Every week the wall is updated to reflect those who have excelled in academics, attendance and attitude.

On Wednesday, seniors Arnulfo Jimenez and Carlos Lopez take *Lake Tahoe News* around to the various classrooms as part of the annual open house at the alternative school in South Lake Tahoe.



Mount Tallac students Arnulfo Jimenez, left, and Carlos Lopez give a tour of the school.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

About 40 people came through the morning of Oct. 20 – including most of the school board and Superintendent Jim Tarwater. It was considered an honor to be picked as one of the guides.

Some of these students have lives many in the community could not relate to.

The student who gave Tarwater his tour is living with her 18-year-old sister who is pregnant. Their parents were deported. The Tallac student works 40 hours a week to help support her non-traditional household. Before going to college next year, her first stop will be to visit her parents.

Jimenez and Lopez didn't talk about their plight, what brought them to the continuation high school. What they wanted to talk about was continuing their education and getting jobs after high school graduation.

They like the flexibility Tallac offers them and the education they are receiving.

Jimenez explains how Matt Kauffman has started Sphere of Influence as an offshoot of the regular art class he teaches.

"It keeps kids from tagging illegally," Jimenez explains. "It helps the community and it keeps the kids out of danger."

Sharing this teaching space is Jackie Tan, who joined the staff earlier this fall from Diamond Springs.

Tan is working with the students to master math so they will be able to pass the state high school exit exam.

Hardly a speck of wall space is visible in Steve Simmons class. Student work is everywhere. Simmons teaches history, life and physical science, and monitors physical education credits.

"The kids set their own pace. No one micromanages. It's up to

them," Simmons said. "They need to see the value in education."

Clearly, the girls who use the nursery next to Simmons' classroom see the value of an education even though they are already parents.

"Most of the girls are parents by themselves," Lopez says outside the nursery where the little ones are sleeping.

The campus is expanding a bit. While the main high school just up the road gets millions upon millions of dollars in new buildings and equipment, Mount Tallac got one of South Tahoe High's old portables.

The plan is this fall after some work is completed it will be usable as a counseling site. Right now privacy at the school is an issue. Principal Susan Baker and counselor Amy Jackson share office space.

Tours of Mount Tallac may be scheduled any time – not just on open house day – by calling (530) 543.2245.