

REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Lunch program in full swing



WATSONVILLE — In a small courtyard at 521 Main St., as kids play, color and blow bubbles, a group of diligent volunteers sits behind a plastic table handing out free lunches to kids in need.

This is just one of 13 sites that give out free lunches through the Summer Lunch Program, run by Community Bridges and funded through the county. Here, kids and families can receive free lunches and find a safe sense of community when parents either cannot provide lunch or cannot be at home to cook or feed their children. A majority of the workers here are teenage volunteers, many of whom were once recipients of free lunches themselves.

Sonia Leonor, one of the few staff members on site, was once one such child. She said the program deeply affected her life.

“When I was a kid my grandma took me to the site at the YMCA,” Leonor said, “and once I was old enough to babysit, I took my cousins. It gives me joy to be able to work for a program that helped me.”

The program is still growing. Jessica Zamora has only been coming for a week and a half with her 2-year-old son Mateo. She learned about the program through her sister, who uses an equivalent program in Fresno.

Ofelia Gonzales, a long time member, said she enjoys the diversity that comes with the program. Kids are connected to new people in both different areas of town as well as cultural and ethnic groups.

“I love being friendly with people and connect with others,” she said. “I think the age range (0-18) is really critical... I love that everything here is done for the children.”

In Santa Cruz County, an estimated 8,769 children, representing 85 percent of all children who benefit from free and reduced-priced lunches during the school year, miss out on similar lunches during the summer, according to a report by the California Food Policy Advocates.

Raymon Cancino, CEO of Community Bridges, highlighted the importance of the summer lunch program.

“There’s always something else to spend money on, infrastructure, a new road,” he said. “But the city always needs to be reminded, this program, it helps kids in situations with economic disparity, and you can see, it pays off tenfold.”

To volunteer or donate, visit CommunityBridges.org.