Coaching for college

After-school program merges soccer coaching, academic tutoring

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Watsonville — Yoni Hernandez started around the Pajaro Middle School as a student at the center of a pack of students kicking a soccer ball. Wednesday, not that long ago, the 18-year-old Cabrillo College student was a player in the Breakaway College Access Project. Now, he's a coach in the after-school program that helps kids with soccer and provides tutoring and mentoring to encourage them to get a high school diploma and continue on with their educations.

The program is celebrating five years of operation. Ausa Watsonville High freshman, Hernandez was part of Breakaway’s first class. “I thought my family, never had been in college so it was the last thing on my mind,” he said. “Breakaway opened my eyes, and gave me the thought that college is an option to pursue a better life.”

Breakaway is the brainchild of soccer enthusiast coach Bill Rees, former Watsonville High teacher Sara Ross and Carol Schindele, who brought organizational development expertise to her role as executive director. Schindele said the idea was to channel the Pajaro Valley’s passion for soccer into academic success.

"The culture of kids coming out of this community every year that the soccer is accounting," Schindele said. "We didn’t see that same culture coming out of the classroom." The program, which serves about 200 students annually, started at Watsonville High and expanded to Pajaro Middle two years ago. The voluntary drop-in three-hour sessions are open between taking soccer skills on the field and preparing academic goals in the classrooms.

Breakaway’s soccer games provide opportunities for campus visits, and college coaches and players come to Watsonville as guest speakers. Students earn points for attendance, which are converted into scholarship dollars when they enroll in college. Every participant might not go right to college after high school, but the goal is to make sure they have the chance.

"We plant the seed that college is an option," she said. Breakaway also stresses the importance of the relationship students form with their adult mentors. Program manager Eduardo Santana said students share their struggles with him and his joy on New Year’s Day, for example, to celebrate his good wishers. "To him, it was a big thing and he meant a lot to me," he said. "It showed me that I am making a positive difference.

"We plan a day that will lead students to commit to college," Schindele said. "They handle the obstacles and live by their dreams, their goals, their dreams, and our mission is to help them achieve their dreams."