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Gateway children get a lesson in baseball

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A group of kids from Harbor Gateway got a lesson in the fundamentals of baseball Monday from Dodgers great Wes Parker as part of a summer program designed to broaden their horizons and keep them away from gangs.

Parker, a defensive star in the 1960s, signed autographs on a field at California State University, Dominguez Hills, and tried to instill a passion for baseball.

"The most important thing is to love the game," Parker told the youngsters. "You've gotta develop passion for the game early."

The kids were there as part of a two-month Summer Fun program initiated in response to the gang-related killing of 14-year-old Cheryl Green in Harbor Gateway in December. Run jointly by the Los Angeles Police Department and ShareFest Community Development, it is among the few new programs targeting the area since Cheryl's death.

The Summer Fun program will end Thursday, just before kids go back to school. For many of the youngsters on hand Monday afternoon, this was their first exposure to the national pastime.

"Most of these kids don't play baseball," said Bryan Doleshel, a managing director of ShareFest Community Development. "These kids have no parks and no places to play."

Much of the summer, the program has been held at a dirt lot underneath high-voltage electrical lines in Harbor Gateway. Los Angeles Councilwoman Janice Hahn hopes to build a community center on the lot someday, but in the meantime the children play pickup soccer there, maneuvering around the transmission towers.

Part of the goal of the program is to teach them about the world beyond Harbor Gateway, Doleshel said.

"We wanted to get them out of their neighborhood," he said. "Hopefully they can see past their current situation and hopefully someday go to college."

After Cheryl Green was killed, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa announced a crackdown on the Latino 204th Street gang, which has a history of targeting black residents. While credited with some success in driving down the area's crime rate, gang experts have worried that few new programs have been offered to provide an alternative to gang life.

The Summer Fun program is one of the only new recreational offerings in the area. At its peak, it has signed up 200 kids. About 50 showed up on Monday.

Earlier this summer, the youngsters were taken to a local boxing gym and were also treated to a soccer clinic with some Chivas USA players. About 300 Harbor Gateway kids and family members were given tickets to a Chivas game.

Parker, who won six-straight Gold Gloves as a first baseman in the late 1960s and early '70s, emphasized the importance of aggressive defense in his remarks to participants Monday, as the baseball team from CSUDH watched.

"First base is easy to play poorly," he said. "But first base is a hugely difficult position to play well. I'm so sick of teams putting sluggers over there who can't field."

He also encouraged the kids, no matter what field they choose, to focus on their goals and not be distracted.

"Anything in life that's supercompetitive and pays well, you have to want it bad," Parker said. "So bad you can taste it."

After the talk, the kids lined up for autographs.

One of them was Erik Garcia, a third-grader from 186th Street School dressed in a Chivas USA jersey.

Asked how things were going in his neighborhood, he said, "They're always shooting," but added that recently, "They got police there, and they stopped."

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