

SUNDAY
June 10, 2007

oaklandtribune.com

Managing editor:

Martin Reynolds

(510) 208-6433

Fax: (510) 208-6477

mreynolds@angnewspapers.com

New approach to youth justice focuses on girls

By Karen Holzmeister

STAFF WRITER

SAN LEANDRO — It was one big party Friday afternoon on the grassy playing fields and blacktop basketball courts high in the San Leandro hills.

Laughter and shouts of joy, understanding and admiration sounded as four dozen girls — clad in pink sweatshirts and dark pants — ate a scrumptious barbecue.

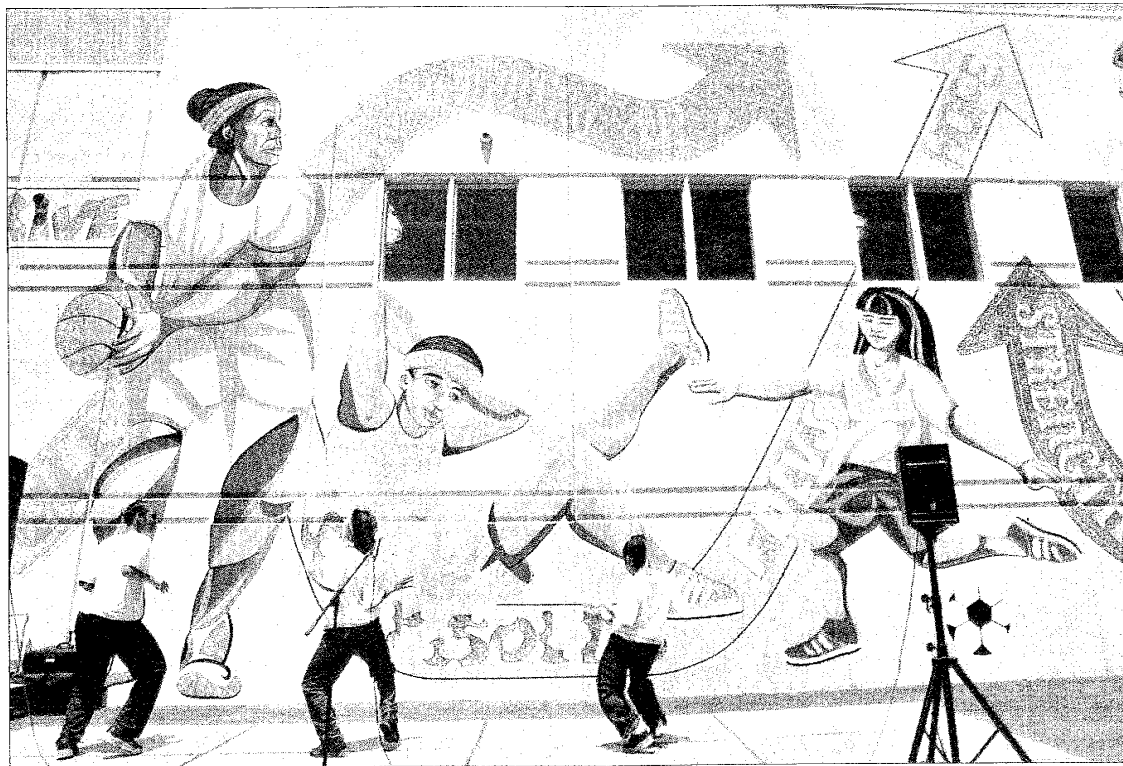
They shared poems, played games, and listened to adults who assured them of their beauty and intelligence — inside and out.

An idyllic event and setting — all behind layers of heavy-duty fencing topped with razor wire.

It was the new Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center's kickoff of girl-focused services at the detention facility.

The county and a variety of community, civic and spiritual groups want to provide girls 18 and younger with the best serv-

Please see **GIRLS**, Metro 3



ARIC CRABB — Staff

FEMALE DETAINEES at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro rehearse dance moves during a girls luncheon and resource fair Friday. The mural overlooks a basketball court and grass playing fields.

Organizations interested in helping in-custody, girl-focused services can contact Barbara Loza-Muriera, Alameda County Interagency Children's Policy Council, 1000 San Leandro Blvd., Suite 300, San Leandro, 94577.

THE OAKLAND TRIBUNE

METRO 3

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► **GIRLS**, from Metro 1

ices possible, both in detention and upon their release.

Many of the girls, victims of sexual exploitation, are helping to define what works and what doesn't.

Starmesha, 17, of Oakland spent a year in the former juvenile hall just down Fairmont Drive from the new center, which opened two months ago.

Out six months now, she's finishing her junior year at a local high school. She works part time for an attorney's office, attends classes at the University of California, Berkeley, and hopes to become an attorney or probation officer after college.

People in juvenile hall helped her find a path away from delinquency and crime, she said, building on county employee Barbara Loza-Muriera's earlier advice that "Everybody needs somebody to believe in you."

But you have to change yourself, Starmesha told the girls, some of whom remembered — and applauded — her.

"I knew that I could do it," she recalled. "I was a bad little girl. I was a messy little girl."

However, Starmesha insisted, none of the girls in the center deserve to be incarcerated.

Many are victims of sexual exploitation, by pimps, other adults or family members. They need a safe place for counseling, training, shelter and health care that is not a locked facility, she said after her brief speech.

Tajanik, an Oakland teenager, sang and talked her way through a poem titled "Kidnap."

The subject of her fast-paced rap was a 13-year-old girl who turned tricks on East 14th Street in San Leandro. The girl escaped her pimp when her mother picked her up, but then was kidnapped again after a car chase along International Boulevard and Lake Merritt in Oakland.

"That little girl was me," Tajanik said.