

community connections

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Self Help PROJECT ACCESS EMPOWERS THE DISADVANTAGED

"It can be intimidating to begin that job search, but having the resources and tools at hand thanks to Project Access gave me the courage to take charge." —Melonie, mother of four, Westminster

When second-grader Hye Won Kim and her younger brother, Jong Bae, were on their way from South Korea to join their parents in the United States, they learned that their father had died. Their mother, a recent immigrant, was left alone with two young children and little idea of where to turn for help.

Fortunately, the affordable housing development in Cypress where the Kims live has a Project Access Family Resource Center. There, Hye Won's mother received comprehensive assistance in the form of an after-school tutoring and enrichment program for

her children, help applying for health insurance through MediCal, and a job training program through CalWORKS that resulted in the mother's employment as a dental lab technician.

Since its founding in 1999, Project Access, Inc., has helped thousands of families like the Kims — working poor, often with little or no English at their command, who live in multi-family affordable housing developments. Project Access helps individuals, families, and seniors face critical challenges by bringing together affordable housing providers and community service agencies to create onsite learning centers that offer low-income tenants convenient access to education, information, and training.

The learning centers are comprehensive. They provide access to information about health,

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Project Access services include tutoring.

finances, family matters, counseling, preschool and daycare services, computer classes, and programs and seminars conducted in partnership with other community nonprofit organizations. Union Bank of California has supported Project Access with grants to help sponsor fundraising events.

Sheryl Nelson, a sales development manager in the bank's Retail Affluent Markets group, is a board member of Project Access. "There aren't many organizations that make it their mission to help someone help themselves," says Nelson. "There are no handouts with Project Access. We give tenants all the tools and information they need to make informed decisions, on their own, in their daily lives. The learning centers provide help with the administrative tasks that set their decisions into motion."

Nelson points to one of many Project Access successes she's familiar with. A four-year-old boy named Jose experienced such separation anxiety from his parents that his behavior was dysfunctional — he was impulsive, often refused to do what he was asked, played by himself, and cried whenever he was in a new situation. Project Access's school readiness program in Fullerton made a crucial difference.

"Jose had perfect attendance and is now ready to enter school," Nelson says. "His parents participated in every opportunity to be involved that they could. The whole family has begun a successful educational process together. Their story embodies the self-sufficiency and independence that is the goal of Project Access for every one of its clients."

Project Access is one of many qualifying organizations for which Union Bank will match employee gifts at 66 2/3 percent during the 2006 P.A.L.S. Invest in Life campaign. ■

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