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Chess Used To Curb Gang Violence

Champions Crowned At Salinas City Hall

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SALINAS, Calif. -- The city dedicated Tuesday afternoon to honoring chess champions from the Alisal Union School District.

Since the tournament back in June, the city has taken steps to host chess activities in other venues, hoping that will attract more kids and eventually reduce gang crime.

Organizers said they want to build a chess movement and give kids in Salinas an early and realistic alternative to turning to drugs and gangs.

Alberto Murillo immigrated to Salinas from Mexico for the fourth grade. That's when his math teacher urged him to master the chessboard.

"I would not be here right now if it wasn't for chess. Chess helped me through school, get to college and I know it could help other students, too," Salinas chess coach Alberto Murillo said.

That's why he set up a chess tournament of champions Tuesday afternoon to attract attention to the value of the game.

City leaders have already launched chess activities in libraries and recreation centers in an effort to help calm down crime on the streets.

"This is our salvation to ending some of the problems we're having in our community, by getting these kids early on like some of the ones you see today," Salinas City Councilman Sergio Sanchez said.

Kids at local elementary schools said they agree.

"It helps me more when I win the prize money because most of it goes into my college fund so it helps me a lot with my future," said Pauline Nocon, sixth grader at Oscar F. Loya Elementary.

"It's really fun you should play. It's like soccer, it's like playing a sport for your physical but it's brain power," said Jose Jacobo, sixth grader at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary.

"Sorry, checkmate. Good game my friend," Murillo said.

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For Murillo, it's about translating lessons from the chessboard into helping kids make the right moves in life.

“It's checkmate because the bishop is right here, backing her up. See when you have backup like friends backing you up. When chess you have backup you get super strong too,” Murillo said.

Leading the way into what he hopes will be a chess movement citywide.

“I believe it with all my heart. I'm a testament of this and as more kids get involved and do this, they will have success. They will be our champions, too,” Murillo said.

Murillo adds that chess is a realistic option for kids because unlike certain sports and other activities it's almost free. All you need is a chessboard. The city is looking at putting chess into the school systems more but are facing tough times with resources and funding.

Also on Tuesday, the city awarded four students who won that chess tournament back in June with gold, silver and bronze medals.

The first place winners also got \$2,000 money prizes, half of which goes directly into their college funds.

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