



Press Release

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Whittier Union Teacher and Coach Shares Inspirational Stories of Struggle, Triumph in New Book

WHITTIER – La Serna High School teacher and football coach Ken LaVigne has spent more than 30 years mentoring students, inspiring his peers and touching the hearts of hundreds of educators across the Whittier Union High School District with his continual compassion, integrity and patience.

LaVigne – who in 2012 was named a California State Teacher of the Year – has documented his experiences in “Coach the Soul,” an inspirational book that profiles heartbreaking stories of struggle and triumph of the students in the school’s award-winning intervention program he created, Organized Academic Support in School (OASIS).

LaVigne celebrated the release of “Coach the Soul” with family, friends and associates in January at the Doubletree by Hilton, which was decorated with football programs, pictures, yearbooks and news clippings from LaVigne’s career as a teacher, coach and football player.

“Working with at-risk students reminds me of my own youth and the times that I came so close to going down the wrong path,” LaVigne said. “What saved me were the teachers and coaches who gave me an identity and a reason to try. I am who I am today because of them, my colleagues and my family.”

Launched in 2007, OASIS pairs sophomores and juniors who are in danger of dropping out of high school with high-achieving peer mentors, who provide daily motivation and emotional and academic support, helping them regain their joy of learning and setting them on a path to graduation.

The majority of stories in “Coach the Soul” are dedicated to OASIS students and their mentors, with chapter titles reflecting core values LaVigne teaches in class such as resilience, courage, transformation and accountability, which provide students the foundation for progress and continued success.

“When I started in the OASIS program, I had a 1.3 GPA and I really didn’t understand why I came to school, so I didn’t try,” senior Jastin Cheadle said. “Mr. LaVigne explained why school is so important and showed us that if you want all these things in life you need to work for it. He’s like my academic grandpa. He’s awesome.”

Cheadle now has a 3.5 GPA and is an OASIS mentor. He plans to attend Cal State Fullerton and study marketing or business.

“When students come into the program, they’re not in a good place,” said junior Jocelyn Jasso, who joined OASIS with a 1.55 GPA last year and had no plans to go to college. “Five to six months later, they’re doing so much better because of Mr. LaVigne and our mentors, who always push us to do better and support us with everything.”

Jasso has a 2.83 GPA and plans to attend Cal State Fullerton and pursue a career in the medical field.

For junior Sky Maestro, problems at home led to self-doubt, bad grades and a 1.5 GPA. He was placed in OASIS, where he has been given organizational tools, has a peer academic mentor and receives constant support and encouragement from LaVigne.

“I was always doubtful that I could achieve anything,” Maestro said. “But this program made a huge difference in my life. Mr. LaVigne is such an amazing man and OASIS is a really great help for so many who need it and don't have easy opportunities to succeed in school.”

For OASIS mentor Jason Moreno, watching the students persevere is its own reward.

“Their eyes light up and they realize that they can succeed if they put in enough effort,” Moreno said. “The lessons they learn in OASIS are carried over to their schoolwork. This is the biggest reward for me.”

LaVigne is able to connect with these students because he admittedly was also not the most motivated student in school himself.

But his life turned around due to his teachers and coaches at Santa Fe, where he played three years of varsity football and graduated in 1972. The sport gave LaVigne purpose and discipline, provided by his coaches and role models – Clint South, Jack Mahlstede and Dick Torres.

“They literally saved my life and made it richer by coaching my soul and making the life I enjoy possible,” LaVigne said.

In 2016, LaVigne led the expansion of OASIS with a new program called HAVEN, which emphasizes senior project planning and post-high school academic and career goal setting with support from adult mentors from the Friends of La Serna, Whittier Host Lions Club and Soroptimist International of Whittier.

“Ken LaVigne’s passion and commitment to students who have given up on themselves is a testament to the power of unconditional love,” Superintendent Martin Plourde said. “As much as Ken has changed the lives of these students, his soul has been indelibly inked by their kindness and gratitude. On behalf of the District, we are all grateful for his selflessness and passion for helping our students believe in themselves and achieving their fullest potential.”

Coach the Soul, released through Robert D. Reed Publishers, is available at www.coachthesoul.net.

PHOTO CAPTION:

012819_WUHSD_COACHTHESOUL: La Serna High School teacher Ken LaVigne recently released his book, “Coach the Soul,” which chronicles heartbreaking stories of struggle and triumph of the students in the school’s award-winning intervention program he created, Organized Academic Support in School (OASIS). He is pictured with students Jastin Cheadle, left, Joselyn Jasso and Sky Maestro.

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