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Alisal students become lead detectives

Pupils create booklet detailing dangers posed by the element

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Portraying comic book-like characters, six Alisal High School students created a "fotonovela" titled "Get the Lead Out!" to teach their family, peers and Monterey County residents about the dangers of lead.

The students met for the last time Tuesday after school to receive their certificates, and a letter from U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, congratulating them for their accomplishments.

"I really appreciate your perseverance," Kathleen Nolan, nutrition education program manager with University of California in the Monterey and Santa Cruz counties, told the students.

The project came about when Nolan asked Alisal High School Health Academy Co-Coordinator Nathan Voigtschild about assembling a group of students interested in making an educational booklet on lead as part of a program by the University of California Cooperative Extension of Monterey County.

"I asked a few of them and they were really into it," Voigtschild said, adding he didn't offer any extra credit for participating in the project. "We wanted them to do it because they wanted to."

Since Feb. 5, the students who volunteered for the project met once a week after school planning and researching, writing the script and portraying their characters.

"I just wanted to learn about something I didn't know anything about," said senior Cynthia Rodriguez.

Rodriguez was joined by Brittney Dominguez, Lorenzo Hernandez, Ericka Juarez, Valerie Martinez and William Ramirez all sophomores.

"[Lead] is a pretty big problem," said Ramirez. "It's almost everywhere and people don't know it."

Using photographs and thought bubbles, the booklet tells the story of six students who call themselves "lead detectives" to investigate what's wrong with the baby sister of one of the characters.

"She has problems she's almost 4 and she still doesn't talk," one character said.

Through their research and work, the students learned the problems lead causes, such as learning and behavioral issues, the students said.

The students learned that lead can be found anywhere, from necklaces and purses to candy and old paint.

According to Nolan, Monterey County has significantly more cases of lead poisoning compared with other counties.

The students explained in the booklet that foods sent to the United States by family from Oaxaca, Mexico, can be highly contaminated with lead mainly due to high lead levels found in soils in Oaxaca where foods are grown and harvested.

"It's important to get the message out," Martinez said, adding though they were serious about the project, they spent most of the time laughing and enjoying their work.

Nolan said 3,000 copies of the booklet will be printed half in Spanish, half in English ' to be distributed.
