

## GOALS expands its sports-oriented youth programs into Anaheim's ABC neighborhood

By Lou Ponsi

Dave Wilk was asked to help build a community garden in an under-served Anaheim neighborhood just east of Brookhurst Street and south of Crescent Avenue.

Instead, Wilk, executive director of the activity-based program for disadvantaged youth called GOALS, is leading an effort to resurrect the neighborhood itself.

The so-called ABC Neighborhood, named for its Alameda, Brownwood and Catalina avenues, had become neglected and overridden by gangs, graffiti and crime, Wilk said. "I think there (was) a general acknowledgement that something had to change," he said. But how to make improvements was "extremely complex."

Still, in less than a year, a previously dilapidated clubhouse in the center of an apartment complex that was a haven for drug use and other illicit activity, has been renovated and now serves as a hub for free children's activities. An outdoor activities deck has been added. Pathways leading to the clubhouse, once strewn with trash and engulfed by overgrown weeds, are now landscaped and pristine. A crumbling swimming pool with swampy water has been filled in and serves as a mini soccer pitch. An amphitheater has been added, along with a racquetball court and a tetherball court.

And, that community garden has been created.

The neighborhood's ABC moniker has been rebranded to stand for "A Better Community."

"This project here is my answer to those who would say it's all hopeless," said Wilk, who was originally recruited in the 1990s by the then Disney-owned Mighty Ducks hockey team to lead



Dave Wilk, executive director of the youth activities program, GOALS, stands in a sand pit which was once an unused swimming pool. The play space is one of many upgrades that surround the new GOALS clubhouse in an underserved enclave in west Anaheim. (Courtesy of Lou Ponsi)

the development of a nonprofit youth hockey program in another low-income neighborhood near downtown Anaheim.

That initial GOALS endeavor, which included learning opportunities along with ice hockey has expanded and is thriving, even though Disney hasn't owned the Ducks for years and is no longer involved. The mission of GOALS, which stands for "Growth Opportunities through Athletics, Learning and Service," is to improve the lives of Anaheim youngsters ages 6 to 19 through sports programs, mentoring, job training and academics.

"This is a good example of pushing an envelope," Wilk said of GOALS' new presence in the ABC neighborhood. "I could just be coaching hockey still at Anaheim Ice with a couple of hundred of kids, which is how I started. We've got 1,500 kids in GOALS. I've coached tens of thousands of kids."



The new GOALS clubhouse in west Anaheim serves as the hub for a variety of activities available for free to children in an underserved enclave in west Anaheim. (Courtesy of Lou Ponsi)

Along with ice hockey, GOALS has incorporated a variety of team sports into its program, including soccer, basketball, roller hockey and lacrosse. GOALS remains a completely free program that has expanded beyond Anaheim to Placentia, Fullerton and Huntington Beach.

“The program did a lot for me,” said Daniel Lopez, 39, part of GOALS’ inaugural hockey program. He is now a coach, mentor and volunteer in the program. “I came from a neighborhood just like this one where there was nothing. There was no organized sports. GOALS came in and provided a sport, hockey, which was something new to us and it was offered to us for free.”



Luis Castro, a coach with the nonprofit GOALS, holds a sign reading “A Better Community,” from the roof of the newly renovated GOALS clubhouse in west Anaheim.

Anaheim native Alex Escobedo was also a GOALS participant as a kid living in an impoverished neighborhood similar to ABC. Now a police officer in Vernon, Escobedo has since moved to Jurupa Valley, but still serves on the GOALS board of directors. “It was somewhere where I could go,” Escobedo said. “My parents both were migrant workers. They didn’t know much about schooling and stuff like that. This guy (Wilk) came into our neighborhood, similar to this, gave us a stick and skates and said, ‘C’mon. Let’s go skate,’”

Having former participants return as adults to give back to the program is also in line with the GOALS’ mission, Wilk said. “That is our model too, to build this long-term contingent. Not only to develop kids, but those kids come back as adults



GOALS Executive Director Dave Wilk stands on a newly constructed deck, which is attached to a renovated structure that is now the GOALS clubhouse in an underserved neighborhood in west Anaheim. A variety of free activities are now available to youngsters in neighborhood. (Courtesy of Lou Ponsi).

to come back as role models, mentors and leaders because they understand.”

Close to 100 children are enrolled at GOALS’s ABC location, with anywhere from 10 to 50 showing up on a given day, Wilk said, adding he’s thrilled with the progress made in such a short time. But he’s not close to being done.

Wilk wants to add more opportunities to the ABC program while continuing to spruce up the area surrounding the clubhouse. “We’ve done so much so fast,” Wilk said. “We’re just scratching the surface.”