

A Vision to Restore Childhood

When California shut down schools, churches and public life, it created an epidemic of anxiety, depression and loneliness, especially among young people.

There is “an insane need for community” among kids, says Alexa Duerst, 26, youth and young adults pastor at the Los Angeles Dream Center.

“When you’re told something is hopeless for so long, it’s hard to recover from that,” she says. “That’s really been the narrative everywhere you turn. ‘This thing is hopeless.’ We started with a two-week lockdown, and now we’re on to, what—Year Two or Three? After a certain amount of time, it’s hard to find hope.”

Early in the lockdowns, Matthew Barnett asked Duerst to create some way for kids to get out of the house and be together in a positive environment.

“When things were shutting down, he said, ‘What can we do to build things up?’” says Duerst.

In the parking lot beneath the shade of solar panels, they created a makeshift school by putting desks out for kids to sit at while taking online classes or doing homework.

“We had our IT guy put Wi-Fi in and set up some computers and gave them all headphones,” Duerst says. “Kids came and used our laptops or brought their own. We fed them breakfast and lunch. They were going to online school, and we helped with homework.”

To maintain accountability and structure, Duerst and team had binders for each child which included emergency contact information—and their class schedules so the Dream Center team could keep them on task.

"I would know if a kid was over playing basketball and he was supposed to be in a math class," Duerst says.

They called her the "principal," and they thrived on being together.

"They were just trying to be kids," she says. "That was the beautiful thing. It was a place for them to be kids again and not have this looming pandemic over their heads."

Turnout to Dream Center youth events has exploded in recent months. "It's crazy. We can't even contain the number of kids who come out," Barnett says.

Sunday and Thursday meetings, Tuesday Bible studies and regular events such as "summer socials" are helping kids overcome unprecedented levels of depression, caused particularly by LA's heavy-handed public health mandates.

"We're seeing repercussions of anxiety that's been instilled in them," Duerst says. "The ongoing fear, the lack of community, the lack of social interaction for those two years—we're seeing the effects today." Some kids are afraid of being in public or interacting socially.

"One kid we saw today has a great family, a great home, he comes to our church, his mom is super-involved, but he's struggling," Duerst says. "It's like he hasn't been able to interact and be with kids for so long. That's really been affecting him."

The youth ministry's job, she says, is "Creating spaces for them to be kids again. And they need a personal revelation of God in their lives, a personal relationship with Jesus." But the Dream Center, she says, will always "be a beacon of hope in the city."