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Teenagers putting focus on healthy eating and exercise State's first lady praises summer outreach effort

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Imani Taylor and Christine Nguyen have an unusual summer project: Find out what their neighbors are eating and ask them why.

The two students at Oakland High School are among nearly 20 teens spending the summer knocking on doors, walking through businesses and parks to see how residents of East Oakland's San Antonio District eat and exercise. They also are looking at local businesses -- mostly liquor stores -- to gauge the availability of fresh fruit and healthier snack items.

"It seems like a strange thing to ask people," Taylor said. "But it really opens up your eyes about diet, health and lifestyle. This has totally changed the way I think about food and exercise."

Their work, part of a larger project to discourage childhood obesity and promote healthy eating habits, drew the attention of California's first lady, Maria Shriver. She visited the students at East Bay Asian Youth Center on Tuesday, toured their neighborhood and talked with them about their work.

"What these kids are doing is amazing," Shriver said. "It's really increasing awareness, and I think it will really help their community."

Shriver is conducting a statewide tour of California to interview residents about issues of health, nutrition and exercise. She said that the program by several groups called San Antonio Neighbors for Active Living Collaborative was a natural place to start.

The group is coalition of organizations in the low-income area east of Lake Merritt that is trying to get children to stop eating so much junk food, remind parents to think about their kids' diet and exercise, and give people more opportunities for exercise.

The students in the summer program received a crash course in health education before hitting the streets. They gave Shriver an earful of their early findings.

"Everywhere I look, I see advertising for junk food," said student Muang Saechao. "Why can't they advertise healthy food more?"

Other students told her how their own parents often undermined their efforts to eat better by buying junk food.

"These surveys are making students and their parents more aware of their own eating habits and exercise," said Amy Tanner of Urban Ecology, one of the groups sponsoring the youth program.

The students also are learning more about their own neighborhood. Taylor, who is African American, said she really didn't know much about her Asian and Latino neighbors until they began researching health. Nguyen said asking total strangers a series of questions helped her get over her shyness.

"Also, after seeing how other people live, I don't feel so bad to be a couch potato," Nguyen said. "I'm not that bad."

Shriver joined the teens and host of organizers and local officials to walk several blocks around East Oakland, visiting a park where summer youth programs were recently resurrected after drug dealers were driven away last year. They also stopped in the Foothill Market convenience store, where owner Ali Mohamed conceded to Shriver that he placed candy and potato chips in front near the counter while the fruit and vegetables are in a less prominent position off to the side.

"People like healthy food," he said. "But they like their candy and doughnuts, too." As if illustrating the point, Francisco Martinez stopped in the store during Shriver's visit with his sons, Julian, 10, and Kristopher, 7. He bought sodas and Cheetos for the boys and two cans of Old English Ale and a candy bar for himself.

"We eat pretty healthy meals," said Martinez, chuckling. "But when it comes to snacks, we just get what ever we want. I guess I could do better."

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