

MARIN SCHOOLS

Strawberry teen fosters after-school chess boom



DOUGLAS ZIMMERMAN — SPECIAL TO THE MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL

Branson School junior Henry Lien, the founder of ChessPals, at the campus in Ross on Friday. The organization offers chess classes to students at five schools in San Rafael.

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Education administrator Mike Taylor, who runs the after-school programs for San Rafael City Schools, loves seeing kids scramble to play chess.

Taylor said interest in the game has taken off with the introduction of the weekly classes run by Henry Lien, a 17-year-old junior at Branson School in Ross.

"It's wonderful to see the students waiting for their chess coach to arrive so they can learn the next set of moves and play chess with their friends in a fun, challenging and supportive environment," Taylor said.

Taylor credits Lien with bringing the joy of chess to a more diverse and underrepresented student population.

"Henry is absolutely wonderful," said Taylor, a former principal at Coleman Elementary School in San Rafael. "We started working with him at Coleman and we saw great engagement and excitement."

Lien, a Strawberry resident who has played chess since age 5, is founder of ChessPals.org. The organization, which has applied for nonprofit status, runs weekly chess programs at five San Rafael elementary schools and is expanding to chapters across the country and to seniors' groups.

"Thanks to Henry and the ChessPals program, we've seen immediate engagement and excitement from students in our after-school programs who have never played chess before," Taylor said. "Everyone is building really meaningful connections."

Lien and six of his peers lead the free chess programs at Coleman, San Pedro, Bahia Vista and Laurel Dell elementary schools and at Venetia Valley K-8 school. Bay Area Community Resources Inc., a group that supplies services to schools, has been covering costs for the after-school program for the last year or so and during a summer camp last year, Lien said.

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Lien, who speaks Spanish, said he is devoted to bringing a love of chess to predominantly first-generation immigrants or native Spanish-speaking students in Marin who previously had no access to the game.

"Nine out of 10 kids in the classes are first generation," Lien said. "They're a really underrepresented group in California chess."

The curriculum for ChessPals is based on an instructional, animated website called ChessKid. Each ChessPals class usually teaches one concept and then tries to incorporate it into a game.

Former Corte Madera residents Jeffrey and Lanette Gordon said they are pleased that Lien is taking over leadership of the Marin youth chess world.

The Gordons, whose son Gabe was a five-time first-place finisher in the Northern California chess championships run by the U.S. Chess Federation, were the "parents of Marin chess" for many years, Lien said.

The Gordons, who now live in Petaluma, ran the biannual Marin Scholas-



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ChessPals founder Henry Lien, a 17-year-old Strawberry resident, has been playing the game since he was 5 years old. He started the ChessPals educational program in 2018.

tic Chess Tournament from 2005 to 2020.

"We had 150 kids from 30 to 40 schools," Jeffrey Gordon said.

Lanette Gordon said she helped Lien find other teen coaches when he was starting ChessPals in 2018. Lien took private lessons with Gabe Gordon and also trained with Lanette Gordon.

"Henry is a terrific kid," Lanette Gordon said. "He's a real go-getter."

Jeffrey Gordon said chess is good for kids in strengthening brain function.

"We strongly believe that chess helps children with cognitive development," he said. "They practice using their brains — it's men-

tal exercise, just like physical exercise. That helps kids think better and makes them smarter."

He added that chess also teaches patience and how to be good sports, whether winning or losing.

"It also helps kids to learn how to look at things from the other person's point of view," Gordon said. "You can use chess to teach life lessons."

Lien first began teaching chess to school kids from diverse populations when he was a 12-year-old seventh-grader working to complete his bar mitzvah project at Congregation Rodef Sholom in San Rafael. Bar mitzvahs, or bat mitzvahs for girls, are the coming-

of-age transition for Jewish 13-year-olds.

Lien chose to introduce chess to students at Venetia Valley K-8 school, directly across North San Pedro Road from Rodef Sholom.

"I saw it had an impact on kids," he said. "I liked it."

Lien continued to work with students until COVID-19 put a damper on the in-person classes. He then moved the classes online.

At one point, Lien took seven of his top players to a chess tournament in Novato, he said.

Around 2018, Lien got the idea for ChessPals and he began recruiting coaches to expand the program to other San Rafael schools. That took off with the sponsorship of Bay Area Community Resources.

In recent months, ChessPals has formed youth chapters in the East Bay, Davis, Irvine, Austin and Atlanta.

The group is also reaching out to seniors centers. Most recently, the group formed a partnership with Vivalon in San Rafael, which offers activities and services to Marin seniors, Lien said.

"California and Marin chess are very strong, but they have so far been a homogenous group," Lien said. "I like that we're bridging the gap."