



Salsa dancing, painting and Italian dining: Valentine’s event creates ‘normal’ afternoon for Hillcrest youth and families



By [Sarah Evans](#), OYA Communications
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The horns and distinctive beats of salsa music drifted out of the auditorium, where youth and their families attempted newfound dance moves. Parents and siblings painted cards, sculpted clay, and learned African drumming alongside youth. The scent of Italian food filled the gym as families dined and chatted.

For several hours on February 13, it was tough to distinguish the activities at Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility’s high school from an open house at a regular public school.

As Madhava J., who worked with clay alongside his son Andrew, put it: “This feels like my high school art class.”

Providing a sense of normalcy for youth and their families was part of the goal of the Valentine-themed Hillcrest Family Engagement Event, organized by OYA’s Family Advisory Council with heavy-duty help from facility staff and volunteers. About 140 youth and 70 visitors participated.

“They can sit at a table and have a good meal together, and participate in all these activities with their kids,” said Amy Cole, one of the parent



Flowers adorned the tables where youth and their families enjoyed an Italian-style meal.



Andrew J. (left) and his father, Madhava, sculpt clay together.

organizers. “Every opportunity the youth have to spend more time with their family is important.”

Other goals were to help families feel more comfortable visiting their youth and encourage them to become more engaged in the future.

The Family Advisory Council and Hillcrest staff spent months organizing all the details, including a bus from Portland to Hillcrest that allowed about a dozen family members to carpool to the event.



Youth line up for a salsa dancing lesson. Photo by Barry Shapiro, volunteer photographer

Volunteers from the Salem Art Association led the art activities and provided background music during the catered meal. About 35 Oregon State University students volunteered to help run the activities and spend time with youth whose families didn't attend.

The Hillcrest event was a pilot project for the council, Cole said, noting that their goal is to bring similar events to all OYA facilities.

The event was definitely a door-opener for some. One nervous mother waiting in the hallway for her son to arrive said she'd driven down from Astoria. She'd never been to Hillcrest before — and she wasn't the only first-time visitor.

Madhava sees his son about once a month, but he appreciated the chance to do more than talking at a table in the visiting room.

"This is a little more free form," he said. "Everybody gets to walk around instead of just sit. It puts us more at ease and lets us get time to talk."

"It's cool to spend time together doing something," his son added. He appreciates all of his dad's visits, he said, and "knowing someone's gonna be there for me."

Over in the gym, Sara P. and Tim P. ate with their son and remembered past Valentine's Day dinners at home. Sara, who helped arrange the catering for the



Salem Art Association volunteers set up a card-making activity for the families.



event, typically "goes all out" preparing a fancy meal for the holiday, her husband said.

"When kids are on the streets in their normal life, they don't sit and talk to their parents like this," Tim said. "It brings normalcy, and a chance to bond with your kid again."

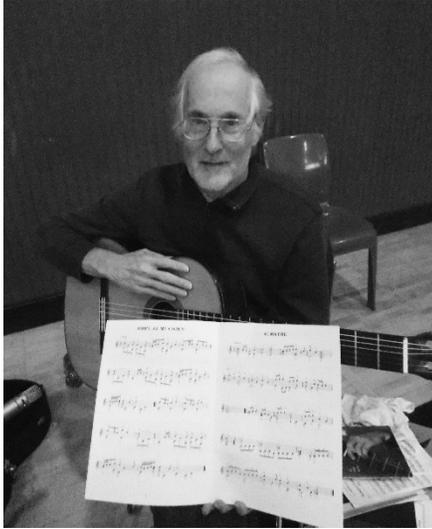
"My son and I didn't have the best relationship at the end when he came here. But now our relationship is great, because I keep coming to visit him, and we get a chance to sit and really talk to each other."

His son, Tim, was equally impressed with the event.

"It means the world; it's something to look forward to," he said. "Here, in a different atmosphere where everyone is happy to see and spend time with their family, it means a lot more than a regular visit."

Photos by Hillcrest Youth

Several Hillcrest youth tried their hand at photographing the event alongside volunteer photographer Barry Shapiro. Here are some of their images.



A guitarist provided background music for the meal.



Lining up for the meal.



A finished card.



Outside the card-making room.