

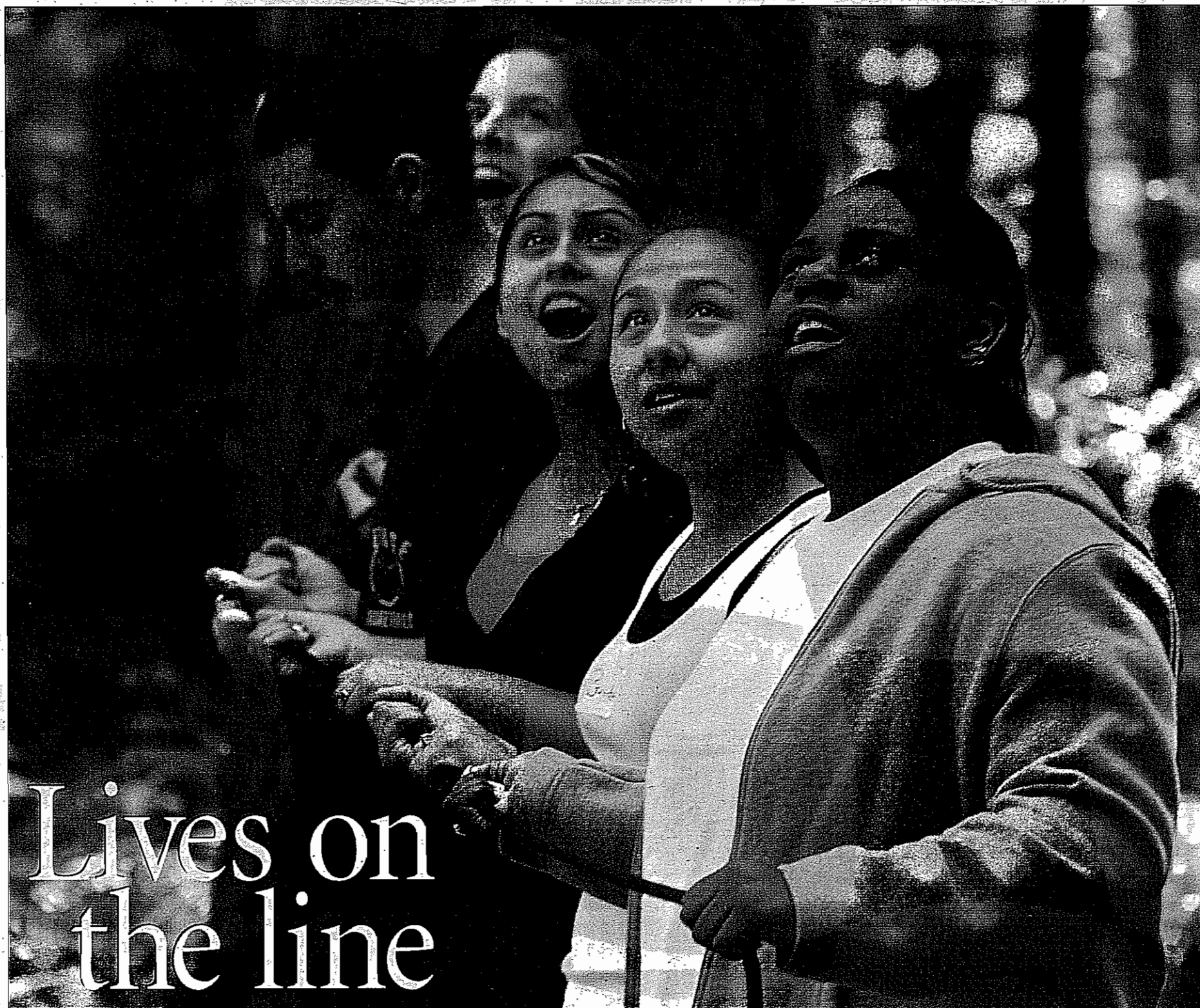
inPORTLAND

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The Oregonian



Lives on the line

How to keep kids in school? Roosevelt High's Step Up program, now expanding to Madison and Marshall, pushes students to push themselves. It works. By Scott Learn | Page 10

Lives on the line

How to keep kids in school? Roosevelt High's Step Up program, now expanding to Madison and Marshall, pushes students to push themselves. It works.

The group of 13 heads down a curving trail, pine needles and bark chips crunching underfoot, drawing closer to the ropes challenge course with every step. Eduardo takes the lead, grinning, the hem of his black-and-red basketball shorts bouncing just below his thin knees. LaRica lags behind, stone-faced, biting her nails. When a doe and a fawn quietly pass by, she starts and shrinks away.

The group includes 10 14-year-olds, all incoming freshmen this fall at North Portland's Roosevelt High, the school with the city's highest dropout rate.

It also includes Elizabeth Fitzgearld, a teenage University of Portland student who will try to forge a tight connection with these kids year-round, and Hanif Fazal, the 35-year-old director of Step Up, Portland's most ambitious — and demonstrably effective — dropout-prevention program.

Step Up includes this weeklong Leadership Camp between eighth and ninth grades, four weeks of summer school, older-student mentors and intense after-school tutoring, paid for with an up-and-down hodgepodge of federal, district, private and city money.

It's won national recognition for boosting grades and test scores and reducing dropouts at Roosevelt. This fall, Portland Public Schools will expand the program to Madison and Marshall high schools.

Step Up's success, independent reviews indicate, comes from building strong relationships with students. Its approach: unconventional.

Earlier that morning, Fazal gathered his group in a circle to talk about the day ahead. Beginning their third day of camp, the students had already pushed through an uphill run and a night of truth-telling that brought many to tears.

Today's challenge: a series of obstacles that would

end up pairing the students on taut bungee cords, clinging to each other 25 feet in the air.

"We need support, support, support today," Fazal tells the group. "The object is going to be: Am I going to let this fear stop me, or do I have it in me to take one more step, to push through that?"



The first challenge is just 2 feet off the ground: two level cables, shaped like a V, with the point of the V pinned in a huge Douglas fir. The students pair up, then step up on the cables at the tree, facing each other. They clasp hands and start sidestepping down the V, one on each side, leaning farther and farther into each other until they lose their balance or the gap between them gets too big and they fall.

The sun is starting to burn off the morning chill. In the background, the Sandy River flows by with a steady whisper.

A pair of girls goes first, giggling, while Eduardo Reyes and the other students help with spotting. Fazal looks on approvingly.

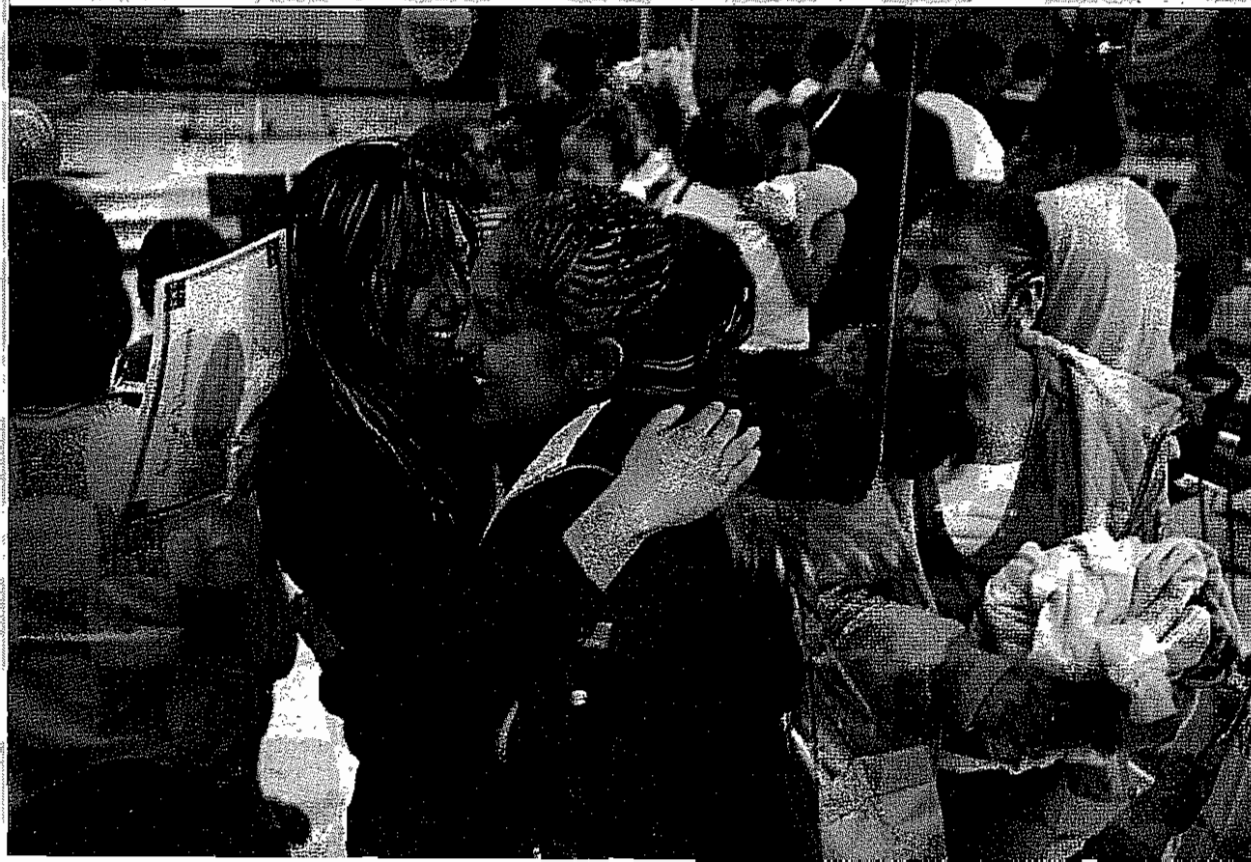
Eduardo, the oldest of three children, loves the idea of being a leader and a role model. But he was in a gang through seventh grade and came whisker-close to getting shot.

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By Scott Learn
THE OREGONIAN



To see a video on Step Up's Leadership Camp, go to www.oregonlive.com/portland



ABOVE: Hanif Fazal, director of the Step Up dropout-prevention program, reassures a tearful Tajzamoree Waters after she couldn't complete one of the rope challenges at an overnight Leadership Camp for incoming freshmen at Roosevelt High. Later, her partner on the climb, Mila Buckland, praised Tajza for continuing to climb long after she wanted to stop: "She got as far as she could," Mila told the group. Step Up, run by nonprofit Open Meadow Schools, uses the summer camp to begin building connections between adults and students, and among the students themselves.

LEFT: Incoming Roosevelt High freshman Anna Arais (center) gets a hug from friend Yadira Sanchez after returning to Roosevelt on a Friday afternoon. Brenda Romero (right) paired with Anna on the camp's ropes challenge course, with the two girls going first on the toughest climb.

PHOTOS BY JOEL DAVIS/THE OREGONIAN



"If you look at LaRica's life, people are going to say, 'What are her chances of getting to college?' If you know LaRica, she's got a great chance. But LaRica's got to know LaRica."

HANIF FAZAL, THE DIRECTOR OF STEP UP, ON LARICA ROBINSON (LEFT)

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Eduardo escaped what he calls that "evil mind-set" with the help of his basketball coach and Step Up's George Middle School staff. Still, Fazal wonders: Can Eduardo handle not being in the spotlight?

Eduardo teams with Jorge, a quiet friend from George Middle. "Oh, I love you," Eduardo says in falsetto as they grasp hands. They go back and forth, laughing and teetering, and fall off after five steps.

"The trick is to work on trusting your partner," Fazal says. "If you trust your partner, you're going to stay balanced. You aren't going to drop each other."

Now it's LaRica Robinson's turn. The night before, she opened up to her 28 classmates at the camp, telling them through tears how the grandmother who raised her died of cancer in December.

But by her own admission, LaRica is tough on teachers and authority figures. She's paired with Fitzgearld, her 19-year-old tutor and advocate for next school year at Roosevelt. The two have been butting heads since Day One.

Plus, LaRica's scared.

She shakily steps on the cable. Eduardo and the other kids line up to spot her. "We got your back LaRica," Eduardo yells.

LaRica puts her head in her hands. "I am so terrified." She screams. "I'm going to die, I swear to God!"

"You got to stop saying what you can't do, LaRica," Fazal says. Fitzgearld and LaRica start shuffling down the cables, leaning into each other.

"This is your advocate you can trust all year long," Fazal shouts.

"I gotta have more of your weight, LaRica," Fitzgearld says. They start stepping more confidently. When they drop off after nearly a dozen paces, they've gone farther than the other pairs.

They hug. Eduardo gives LaRica a high-five. As they head to the next

obstacle — a far more demanding one — LaRica is in step with the other kids and smiling.

Fazal steps alongside Eduardo. "This is you being the leader you want to be," he says. "No going down that other path."

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Fazal speaks from experience. His dad was out of the picture by the seventh grade, but not before telling him he was never going to amount to anything. His mom worked the swing shift at 7-Eleven, trying to support him and his three sisters in Beaverton. By 16, he was drinking, doing drugs, living with a girlfriend in the old Civic Apartments on Burnside and constantly getting kicked out of class.

"Not once in my education, up to then, did someone say, 'Hey, are you going to be OK? Can I help?'" Fazal says.

That changed at Portland Community College, where a teacher told him he could pass any class at Harvard if he could pass his history class. Fazal got a C-minus, then ended up graduating from Portland State with a psychology degree and a 3.5 GPA.

Step Up's students, many already behind in school, "have to believe they're determined, intelligent people; that has to be part of their identity," Fazal says. "I tell them, 'These things that happen in your life are either going to be the reasons you fall apart or the reasons you have the biggest impact in the world.'"

Step Up sprang four years ago from North Portland's Open Meadow Schools, a nonprofit with more than three decades of experience helping kids others might give up on.

The program works with students who struggle in school, with referrals

from middle school teachers. But so far, independent reviews show Step Up participants posting better results than their peers at Roosevelt.

In 2005-06, none of Step Up's participants dropped out, and their test score gains were considerably higher than those of their peers, a December 2006 review by the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory found. Their grade point averages were consistently a half-grade or more higher than the school average, and students and teachers both gave the program high rankings in the education lab's surveys.

The program's recipe includes building strong connections with students and encouraging them to help one another. A third ingredient: "We gotta care about these kids," Fazal says, "and absolutely 100 percent believe in them."

For Eduardo, it's important to see the value of contributing to the



Fazal explains a ropes course challenge to a group of Step Up students. Step Up started four years ago and has shown impressive results by combining the camp, yearlong tutoring and peer mentors. The camp helps show students they can beat what seem like insurmountable odds in school, Fazal says. "The big hump is their freshman year," he says. "It's such a big difference in school size, homework and pace. It's incredibly easy to fall behind."

community, Fazal says. "He's very charismatic, very intelligent and insightful. How can he channel that into something not just for himself but for others?"

On road trips, Eduardo likes to see what people build in open spaces. If he doesn't make the NBA, he wants to be an architect or get into real estate when he grows up. But Eduardo's parents finished just one year of middle school. "They care," Eduardo says. "But it's really up to me to care about school. It's not their decision to make."

LaRica wants to be a teacher and the first one in her family to go to college. She's a thoughtful, funny person, Fazal says, and will make a phenomenal teacher. She can also get irritated easily. And she's lost a lot of important people in her life. When camp ends and other parents arrive to pick up their kids at Roosevelt and celebrate their success, she'll ride the bus home alone.

LaRica and others like her are in a world "where their grandmother dies and nobody knows at school, nobody says anything," Fazal says. "Even though the adults would say, 'You didn't tell us.' She's like, 'You don't see me.'"

Fazal's dark green T-shirt features a picture of Martin Luther King Jr. and the saying, "We're talking about a revolution." He wants these kids to help change North Portland. But he knows the camp is just planting the seeds.

Later this summer, the students in Step Up will take four weeks of summer school to prepare for their freshman year. During the school year, they'll have an advocate and tutor who will meet with them after school and talk often with their parents and teachers.

Even with that, Fazal says, when the kids are failing a class or struggling to catch up, they'll have to be both humble enough to ask others for help and strong enough to trust that they can make it through.

"If you look at LaRica's life, people are going to say, 'What are her

chances of getting to college?" Fazal says. "If you know LaRica, she's got a great chance."

"But LaRica's got to know LaRica."



The next challenge is just like the last — except the V is more than two stories off the ground. The students will climb to it like telephone linemen via spikes stuck into another huge fir. They wear helmets and harnesses attached to bungee cords pulled tight by their classmates on the ground, a system that lets their peers support them when they fall.

As the former middle schoolers approach, their eyes get wide. Some put their hands over their mouths.

Eduardo and Jorge are second in line, and Eduardo scampers up, grasping hands with Jorge and moving swiftly down the V. They giggle and chatter in Spanish before they drop off. But later Eduardo acknowledges he was scared.

The camp's biggest surprise was "what we had to fight through," he says, "the fear."

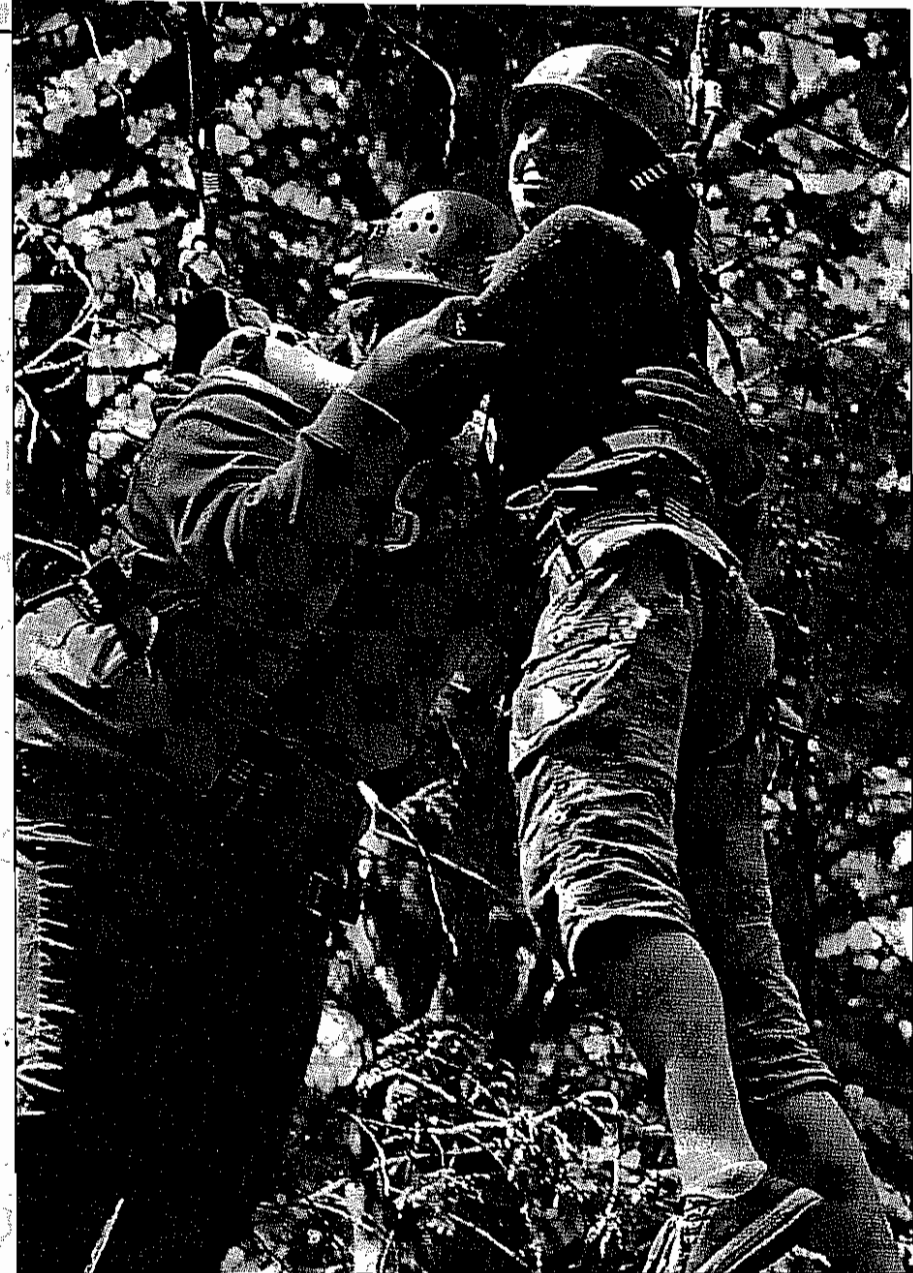
Flush with success, Eduardo is eager to go again. He and another boy, Jose, are strapping on their harnesses as two girls take their turn. But one of the girls asks to stop just three spikes up the tree. She goes six spikes farther amid tears and shouts of encouragement from the group. On the ground, Fazal hugs her. "This is a big, big win for you," he says.

Now the girl's friend is standing alone, 25 feet up, and needs a new partner. Fazal watches closely. Eduardo defers to Jose, reluctantly pulling off his own harness.

Fazal smiles. It's a big moment, he says later. Eduardo has stepped back.

Now, Fitzgearld and LaRica strap in. Fazal murmurs encouragement to LaRica, then turns to the group as she puts her foot on the first spike.

"LaRica was talking about losing people in her life last night," he says. "This is our chance to let her know she's not alone."



Advocate Elizabeth Fitzgearld (right) embraces LaRica Robinson after the pair finish their walk on a V-shaped high wire. Fitzgearld, who will tutor Robinson and other Step Up students at Roosevelt next school year, says she was "so scared" of the ropes challenge but wasn't about to back out. "When LaRica and I were on the V, I was like, 'Thank God,'" Fitzgearld says. "She has to see I can support her."

"No!" LaRica wails. "I can't believe I'm going to freakin' do this."

"Keep going," Fazal shouts, "just keep moving. Your grandma's right there watching. She's right there with you, LaRica."

"Oh, my God!" LaRica screams. The other students cheer and shout. She slowly climbs, looking up.

Fitzgearld reaches over to clasp her hands. "I got you, OK?" she says.

LaRica shrieks, her face covered in dappled sunshine. A soft breeze blows.

"Straighten your arms. Put your arms up," Fitzgearld says gently. They take their first step out.

"Oh, my God, I'm going to fall!"

LaRica says. She and Fitzgearld jerk back and forth.

Below, the kids grip the bungee cords, focused intently on the pair above. "Look at us, LaRica!" Eduardo shouts. "Go!"

LaRica and Fitzgearld take two, three, four, then five more steps, stretched wider and wider across the V. They wobble, then fall, bobbing in their harnesses, laughing and hugging in midair. The kids slowly lower them to the ground.

LaRica is breathless and beaming. The other girls cluster around her. "I was shaking so bad," she says.

"I just can't believe I did that." ■

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