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All firsts at these Olympics
FamiliesFirst kids broaden horizons at sports event

By Bruce Gallaudet
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In 1974, two people formed the Praul Center Residential Treatment Program in Davis to serve three emotionally disturbed boys. Soon, they added a foster care center, two more residential treatment programs, a school, the Yolo Crisis Nursery and other services.

In 1985, the organization changed its name to FamiliesFirst and continued to expand its services to other communities. As the company grew, it came to employ hundreds of people serving thousands of children across Northern California.

Meanwhile, a similar organization was operating in Campbell. It got its start in 1867 when the Eastfield Home of Benevolence, an orphanage, merged with Ming Quong, which rescued Chinese girls from slavery and prostitution in San Francisco. The two came together to form EMQ Children & Family Services, which expanded and added innovative programs over the years.

Now, EMQ and FamiliesFirst have merged to form the largest social services agency in the West for children in crisis.

The new company, EMQ FamiliesFirst, will serve 18,000 children in 30 counties in California, providing foster care and adoption services, intensive in-home services, outpatient mental health services, prevention and early intervention, residential treatment, school-based services and transitional housing.

About two years ago, FamiliesFirst approached EMQ about a merger.

FamiliesFirst saw an opportunity to combine its best practices with EMQ's and strengthen both organizations, said EMQ FamiliesFirst Senior Vice President and former FamiliesFirst CEO Walter Grubbs.

"We really believe what we're doing is for the benefit of the kids and families," Grubbs said. "We really believe this will help us be able to serve them more."

Darrell Evora, the president of EMQ FamiliesFirst, agreed.

"One of the coolest things about the merger was board members asked 'Is this going to be best for kids and families?'" he said. "That's a great environment to work in, to know the focus is on the community."

The merger will also better protect the new organization against the state's quagmire of a budget, said Jerry Doyle, CEO of EMQ FamiliesFirst.

"There's a kind of scale," Doyle said. "Because of our size, if we do take a blow, we're more able to take a blow. It also gives us more political clout."

The combined companies will save about \$1 million in overhead costs, but because the counties the organization serves are suffering in the current economic climate, EMQ FamiliesFirst could also be affected.

"We're very concerned about the state budget," Doyle said.

The larger organization should, however, be able to weather the storm and provide more and varied services to families and children, Doyle said.

"Both agencies have been in the business of helping kids and families for decades," he said. "We've amassed an impressive pool of talented staff, together built fantastic programs and our proven results speak for themselves. Joining together means we'll have a larger voice to advocate for children in need."

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