

Central Coast affiliate celebrates 10 years of empowering local girls

By LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

In 1918, women achieved the right to vote. More than 50 years earlier, a movement began in New England during the Industrial Revolution to empower a new working class of young women, who had come in from the country to support their families or seek independent status by working in textile mills and factories.

The result was Girls Inc., a nonprofit dedicated to inspiring girls to be “strong, smart and bold.”

Surely some of those girls must have grown up to become Suffragettes.

By 1995, Girls Inc. had achieved national status and was creating community-based programs to empower girls to “reach their full potential and to understand, value and assert their rights.” In 2009, Girls Inc. reached a reported 900,000 girls through affiliates, online presence and educational programs and publications.

This year, the Girls Inc., affiliate on the Central Coast celebrates its 10th year of service. Working with girls ages 9 to 18, the organization has served more than 900 girls through 24 schools in six cities.

Director Patty Fernandez has been with the program almost since its inception. A 1999 graduate of CSU Monterey Bay with a degree in liberal studies, Fernandez not only comes from the community but also serves as a symbol and reminder to younger girls of what empowered young women can achieve if they believe in themselves.

After graduation from CSUMB, Fernandez was planning to go into counseling.

“Girls Inc. knew I had graduated from Alisal High School in Salinas, and invited me to become a mentor,” she said.

She started as a volunteer and eventually became the executive director.

“I am so grateful the founders of Girls Inc. saw the need for girls to take a look at their options in life—to understand they have options and created a program dedicated to young women, so they could learn what to envision, to ask for, to hope for, to achieve.”

This month, Fernandez has turned her attention to CSUMB, as 45 local



Some of last year's Smart Choices classmates share a meal.

high school girls head to campus to participate in Smart Choices. The weeklong program gives girls the chance to experience college life in hopes that the tangible exposure will inspire them to make positive life choices about their education, their relationships, their health.

“Smart Choices, which runs the third week of June,” said Fernandez, “enables high school freshmen from King City to Castroville to spend a week living on campus with a roommate, and experience college life. The goal is to expose them now, so they will be inspired to prepare themselves during high school to be able to go to college: ‘These are your choices, these are the classes you need to take, the decisions you need to make in life.’”

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“The girls come to understand the dream of college, to get a taste of what they can have. It is no longer a secret; it’s not out of reach. They can see it and touch it.”

Nearly 90 percent of the girls are on scholarship. For most, it is their first time away from home, and 95 percent of them will be the first in their family to go to college, according to Fernandez.

Estefania Cabrera, who will be 18 in July, went through the Smart Choices program four years ago. Now, in her senior year at Seaside High School, she is working as a facilitator for the program while preparing for her departure to San Diego, where she will attend the University of San Diego this fall. Cabrera will be the first member of her family to go to college.

“Growing up,” she said, “I pretty much imagined doing what my mom did; a lot of cooking and cleaning. I never thought about going off to college; I imagined graduating from high school and getting a job, cleaning houses with mom and aunt. I never thought I’d go off to college and eventually have a career.”

After her participation in Smart Choices, Cabrera went to high school and became more actively involved than she had imagined, including participation in the Echo Leadership Program. Part of Girls Inc., the program is designed to encourage girls to go to college and plan for future careers. She also developed a mean game of tennis as one way to diversify her interests and abilities.

“Through Echo Leadership,” said Cabrera, “I developed leadership skills and the ability to get into college, get through an interview, and get a job. Even more important, I gained confidence. And when I leave for college this fall, I will leave my younger siblings behind, but along with them, as a Girls Inc. mentor, I will have left them with the right tools to get there too.”

Nataly Martinez used Girls Inc. to transition out of the dangerous gang lifestyle. She joined a local gang at age 12 for the same reason girls her age join Girl Scouts; it gave her a sense of belonging and she felt protected by something bigger than herself.

Except she didn’t belong, she didn’t feel cool, and she wasn’t protected. Being a gang member was not what she expected. And it had devastating effects on her life and her family. Her peers began looking at Martinez differently — wary and judging.

“All they saw,” she said, “was that I was a ‘gang-banger.’ That was enough for them to decide what kind of person I was. I joined the gang to feel protected, but when rival gang members started coming to my house, trying to start fights with me, I knew going through all the name-calling and harassment was not worth it; I had to get out.”

She finally turned to someone she truly could trust; her father, who found out about Girls Inc.’s Smart Choices Summer Program. She was nervous about the idea, but her father gave her the push she needed and helped her fill out the application.

“I was scared when I was accepted into Smart Choices,” said Martinez, “because I was not going to know anyone there. After thinking about it, I decided this would be a good chance for people to really get to know me. I went to CSUMB and met lots of new girls. Every day I learned something new, like how to plan for college, and the requirements to graduate from high school. I also got to go to the beach, where I learned yoga and how to surf. We talked about beauty, and I learned that looks are not everything.”

While Martinez enjoyed campus life and the various workshops she took, the best part for her was meeting new friends, girls she would never have considered befriending before. They told her it was cool that she was making such a huge change in her life.

“Looking back,” said Martinez, “I’m glad I went to the Smart Choices Program because I saw that I am not the only girl going through problems, and that I can change. Now that I am going to be a high-school freshman, I plan to be the first in my family to go to college. I do want to come back to help girls like me succeed. Thanks to Girl’s Inc., I now know I have a future.”

For more information about Girls Inc. of the Central Coast or how to sponsor a local girl to Smart Choices this summer, call Elizabeth Contreras at 772-0882 or visit www.girlsinccc.org.