

# Local News

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# CHALLENGE FOR TEENAGE GIRLS



SUSANNA FROHMAN — MERCURY NEWS

Sixteen-year-old Stephanie Ramirez, left, talks with her mother, Lorraine Ramirez, over dinner. Both have participated in the Girls For A Change group.

## SOUTH BAY NON-PROFIT HOLDING SUMMIT TODAY

By Katherine Corcoran  
*Mercury News*

Stephanie Ramirez, 16, with spiked hair, thick eyeliner and numerous body piercings, knows what people think when they pass her on the street: "Trouble."

Naiema Din, 16, a Muslim who is make-up-free and wears a *hijab* (covering) along with her jean jacket and flip-flops, knows what people think when they see her: "Oppressed."

Today, both San Jose girls will stand before 1,200 of their peers at the San Jose McEnery Convention Center and ask them, just for a day, to forget about looks and think about change.

"Stop with the fashion and the TV for a second," Stephanie said in an interview before the summit. "Focus on your mind.

Focus on your ideas — that thing in the back of your mind that you wouldn't even say to your friends."

The two veterans of Girls For A Change, a non-profit South Bay group challenging teen girls to identify problem issues in their lives — and work to solve them — will help the organization host its second summit, drawing girls from 50 Bay Area middle and high schools for a day of workshops, performances and inspirational speakers.

The non-profit group, funded in part by major corporations such as Citibank and National Semiconductor, was founded to spur community action mainly among girls in low-income, high-crime neighbor-

### GIRL POWER

**What:** Girls For A Change Summit

**Who:** Open to all girls in grades 6-12

**Where:** San Jose McEnery Convention Center

**Cost:** Free

**When:** Today, registration, 8-8:45 a.m.; check in, 8:30-9:15 a.m.; opening ceremony, 9:30 a.m.

**Keynote speaker:** Rebecca Walker, author, activist, co-founder of the Third Wave Foundation, a philanthropic organization for young women, and daughter of Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Alice Walker

**Workshops:** Topics include feminism, mentoring, self-empowerment, body image, hip-hop and career choices.

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# GIRLS | Non-profit holding summit today

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hoods and those who wouldn't otherwise be singled out as leaders.

But after just a year and a half in existence, Girls For A Change residuals are far-reaching. Stephanie, who has thrived in the program and sits on the board, recently ran away from home and now stays in a teen shelter. She credits Girls For A Change, which she joined with her mother, for helping both of them rebuild the family relationship.

"We have the family and the crisis to deal with, but we can easily step into Girls For A Change and everything is back to normal," Stephanie said. "I can still talk to my mother."

There is no typical girl in the program. But Stephanie and Naiema are voices of wisdom and authority that other girls like them don't often hear. The two girls, one who doesn't much care for punk rock, and one who's not religious, are also close friends.

"One of our core values as an organization is that social change is created most effectively when unlikely partners are sitting at the table," said Nico Clifford, Girls For A Change executive director. "We have girls from alternative schools, middle class homes, drug and alcohol rehab centers. . . . The changes they talk about and create are bigger than if they were all middle class girls or all group home girls. They see that the problems are because of the diversity between them."

Girls in today's summit will be assigned to teams, with adult women volunteers as coaches, to design and carry out a service project in their communities. The first Girls For A Change summit in Octo-

ber 2002 resulted in 31 projects, ranging from an informational performance about rape for high school girls to a new recycling program at Evergreen High School.

Stephanie's team put on a self-esteem day for girls at Rancho Middle School in Milpitas.

Naiema's team wrote and produced a video about teen volunteerism that has aired on local TV. Naiema had to contact television stations and learned how to make a pitch. She also believes that, just by being herself, she helped educate people about women and Islam.

**"I'm showing through Girls For A Change that I'm a Muslim woman who is not afraid to use her voice, that Islam respects you in that sense."**

— NAIEMA DIN

"I'm showing through Girls For A Change that I'm a Muslim woman who is not afraid to use her voice," she said, "that Islam respects you in that sense."

Stephanie loved doing fundraising speeches for the organization.

"People who would normally be looking at me walking down the street and saying 'That girl's trouble,' were sitting silent and listening," she said. "I didn't know people like that could actually sit and listen to me for what I had to say."

Stephanie used to come

home from school and retreat to her room, fighting her parents on every rule and regulation they imposed.

Her mother, Lorraine, 42, an administrative assistant at National Semiconductor, answered the call for adult coaches in the hope that she could learn to better understand her daughter. She asked Stephanie for advice on how to approach the girls. Stephanie agreed to attend one meeting to offer tips, but was immediately hooked.

"All the girls there weren't perfect. They weren't perfect little princesses. They all had issues. They connected with me," Stephanie said.

Through planning and fundraising for the self-esteem day, Lorraine and Stephanie developed a new relationship. It was no longer the usual mother-daughter battle.

But Stephanie was also hiding from her parents a relationship with an 18-year-old boy. The pressure of lying got to be too much, she said, and she ran. She figured she had lost everything — her family, school, her chance at college, and her position on the Girls For A Change board of directors. But the strength of her family, and the organization, brought Stephanie and her parents back together.

Despite her experience on the street — or perhaps because of it — organizers consider Stephanie a valuable asset in mentoring other girls, which is why she'll be speaking today.

"Niko said if I want, I can go into what's been happening," she said. "I can get them to listen."

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