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By Amy Goodpaster Strebe

More than 150 representatives from area businesses, schools, city and county government and non-profits turned out last month at SGI to kick-off the largest girl-led grassroots initiative in the county.

Girls For A Change, developed and facilitated by the Silicon Valley Girls Coalition, is a three-year program of meetings, workshops and conferences aimed at promoting middle- and high school girls' ability to be effective civil leaders and activists in their own neighborhoods. The goal is to recruit 5,000 girls from across the valley by year three.

"It was a fantastic event, better than we had hoped it would be," said Niko Clifford, coordinator of the project and one of the founding members of the coalition. "The purpose of the event was to get the community on board the project, and we received 130 interest cards back, which was great."

The Silicon Valley Girls Coalition was established as a task force of specialists on girls' and young women's issues for the County Office of Women's Advocacy.

The coalition functions as an advisory board consisting of girl service providers, funders, girls' parents, government officials, and community leaders. Its goals include community building, networking support for agencies, political advocacy, resource building, media relations and public awareness of girls issues. More than 40 girl service providers from across the county participate in this collaborative group.

According to Clifford, it is the hope of the coalition that the three-year project will serve as a model for a national initiative.

"Five thousand girls trained as leaders will change the county and the nation," she said. "Women are underrepresented in jobs across the board on the decision-making level, and we want to help change that. Girls aren't taught to be leaders or change-makers in school, so this is a way we can teach them to be activists and increase their leadership abilities."

Judy Prothro, a counselor at Los Altos High School, attended the project launch on Jan. 17 and said she would like to get the girls at her school involved in the project.

"It's a wonderful project," she said. "To empower all these young girls at this age is fabulous, and I know it will be very beneficial, not only for them, but for the communities they live in. These skills they will be able to use for the rest of their lives."

Clifford said the first year of the project will feature summit sessions that will focus on girl and community issues as well as leadership through social action.

Girls will leave the summit with the beginning of an action plan for their block, streets, neighborhood, schools, city, state and beyond.

In year two the girls in collaboration with their women partners will return to their communities ready to take steps toward social action. Throughout this year of action and change, the 1,000 girls will reunite at community events to fuel their passion and share their best practices.

They will create a strong regional girl community supported by the involvement of 300 community women. The third year of the project will include the second girls summit with over 5,000 girls from Silicon Valley coming together. The 1,000 girls from the first girls summit will share the work they accomplished over the previous year and a half.

"I was very impressed at how well organized the project is," said Mary Somerville, director of development at the Girls' Middle School in Mountain