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## Hutchison: Girls hear a compelling challenge for change

**By Sue Hutchison**  
**Mercury News**  
Article Launched: 11/06/2007 01:33:06 AM PST

There was a moment when Carissa Gonzalez Phelps was speaking to a crowd of 1,600 girls at the San Jose McEnery Convention Center that had the intimacy of a private conversation. Phelps was telling the girls about her life on the streets, when she was forced to turn tricks at the age of 12, and how she was able to escape that hell and graduate from UCLA this year with a law degree and a master's in business administration.

One girl in the audience raised her hand and asked in a faltering voice, "How . . . how was it like for you to go through all that and still not feel bad about yourself?"

Phelps leaned toward her and said, "That's a good question. I *believed* that I was going to make it out."

### Girls for a Change

She was speaking at the recent annual meeting of Girls for a Change, a national organization based in Silicon Valley that invites girls to design and lead social change projects in their neighborhoods. Most who participate are from low-income communities, group homes or in the foster-care system.

Phelps, a woman who looks far younger than her 31 years, stood on the stage in Exhibit Hall 1 last week as the poster girl for who they could become.

She knows what it's like to feel invisible and unloved. She grew up with 10 brothers and sisters and a stepfather she describes as abusive. When her mother decided that she couldn't handle Carissa, she dumped her in front of the local juvenile hall. Soon Phelps found herself camping out on Fresno's Motel Drive, a grimy strip known for prostitution.

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For the next two years she filtered through juvenile hall, foster homes and back onto the streets where pimps were waiting to put her to work. "I have a memory of being with a man and seeing Garfield underwear on the ground - and it was mine," she told me. "I was thinking, 'I'm a little girl. What is happening?'"

### Then there was hope

When she landed in juvenile hall again, one of the counselors recognized her potential. "He reached out to me," she said. "And it changed my life." She also took hope from her older sister who had left home at the age of 15 and managed, eventually, to graduate from UC-Davis.

Phelps had a natural aptitude for math and taught herself algebra from a textbook while still in juvenile hall. Over the next decade she finished high school and graduated from Fresno State. She applied to law school at UCLA and received almost a full scholarship.

Now, using her skills as an investment analyst in private equity, she plans to be what she calls a "social entrepreneur." She is setting up a foundation to spur economic development in blighted neighborhoods so that kids won't end up homeless and preyed upon in the streets. And she's starting with Motel Drive in Fresno, where she spent the night when she was 12.

Meanwhile, her journey has been made into a documentary that has been submitted to the Sundance Film Festival.

Phelps said she would like to jump-start neighborhood development projects in San Jose, as well. Judging by the response of the Girls for a Change crowd last week, she already has an army of eager volunteers.

"I'm now a part of what you're going to do in the world!" Phelps cheered to the girls. "I'm so inspired by you!"

It was clear that the feeling was mutual.

### IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

To find out more about Carissa Phelps and her work, go to [www.myspace.com/carissaproject](http://www.myspace.com/carissaproject).

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Sue Hutchison's column appears Tuesday in SV Life and Sunday in LifeStyle. Contact her at [shutchison@mercurynews.com](mailto:shutchison@mercurynews.com) and read her blog at [blogs.mercurynews.com/hutch](http://blogs.mercurynews.com/hutch).

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