

Silicon Valley
Welcomes
Prince Edward

Red Couch
Diaries
Reality TV

Cosmetic
Surgery
Revisited

SAN JOSE

Rare View

33 Things You Will
Want to Know
About ABC7's
Janelle Wang, Co-host
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Class Acts

San Jose Magazine
Honors the Valley's
>>> Top Educators
in Both Public and
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4th District
Councilmember
Kansen Chu on
BART, the City
Budget and
Lots More



GIRLS DOING GOOD

Girls For A Change urges teens to speak their minds and take action

A young Whitney Smith was enraged by injustices she saw in the world, such as hunger, racial prejudice, and gender inequality, and felt helpless to do anything to solve them. Teachers and other adults told her to calm down and that life would be easier if she were less outspoken.

Years later, after working in juvenile detention facilities, group homes, and after-school programs, Smith discovered how she could make a change. "It was obvious girls felt powerless," she remembers thinking. "I started asking girls what made them mad, and that opened the floodgates. It got them talking and thinking about what they could do to change things for the better."

Smith went on to found Girls For A Change in 2002. Since then, the number of girls served in Silicon Valley has doubled to more than 1,000, and Smith helped begin a sister program in Arizona in 2005. The nonprofit urges young women of color to discuss issues pertinent to their everyday lives—gang violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and immigration rights, among others—and then guides them in designing, leading, funding, and carrying out service projects in their communities.

Past projects include lobbying elected officials to reopen community centers and painting murals and crafting videos to promote recycling, environmental protection, and positive body image.

Participant Marya Tapia was among a group of girls who visited classrooms to give presentations on gang prevention. "At first, the sixth-graders seemed hesitant, but by the end, everyone was paying close attention," she says. "The two questions we got most were 'Why do you care?' and 'Aren't you scared?' I really feel like we made a difference, maybe not with everyone, but it was a start." Today, Tapia is a sophomore at Santa Clara University and an intern with Girls For A Change.

Professional women from companies such as Google, Sun Micro-

systems, and Cisco Systems help the girls learn leadership skills and serve as positive role models. Volunteer Rosa Castellon, an engineer with Lockheed Martin, started volunteering with Girls For A Change last year after she discovered its website online and read its mission statement. "I really like the idea of empowering young girls, especially girls who are a lot like I was growing up," she says.

Last summer, Castellon led a team of girls at Yerba Buena High School on a drug-prevention project. "I was surprised at how committed the girls became and how much they accomplished with a little encourage-

ment," she says. "You hear so many negative things about young people today. It was so enlightening to meet these kids and see that they are very good people who really want to make a difference."

While the girls are helping to make changes in others' lives, they are also improving their own. "We're teaching girls to face social issues, but they're also learning new ways to deal with personal challenges," Smith says. "In the past five years, I've seen Girls For A Change girls find the courage to leave abusive relationships or to be the first in their family to go to college. I like to think Girls For A Change played a small part in help-

ing them see what's possible, to be able to recognize the opportunities that are out there for them."

This October, Girls For A Change will recruit more Silicon Valley teens at its fifth-annual Girl Summit at the Santa Clara Convention Center. This one-day conference brings together more than 1,500 girls in sixth through 12th grades to learn about social change and be empowered to take action. "We believe girls are the answer," Smith says. "They will be the ones to change their lives and the lives in their neighborhood."

Michele Bertolone

For more information on Girls For A Change and the annual Girl Summit, visit www.girlsforachange.org.



Girls make new friends at the fourth-annual Girl Summit.