

The Ninth Annual Sister-To-Sister Summit: A Day for Middle School Girls

By Anna Eames, Acalanes Class of 2009, 2008 Sister-To-Sister Facilitator



2007 Summit participants with facilitator Helen Wang (right)

Photo provided

Picture a bunch of teenage girls getting together on the weekend: big room, colorful decorations, comfortable and friendly atmosphere, and nonstop girl talk about everything teen girls think about, from relationships, to pressures, to body image.

Now consider that same situation, but focused on reaching solutions for the all too common issues that preteen girls face.

This is the Sister-to-Sister Summit: an annual event made by girls, for girls. “The Sister-to-Sister Summit is an entire day for girls to just be girls and talk about girl stuff,” said co-chair of the Sister-to-Sister Summit program, Valarie Burgess, who initiated the annual tradition of the program in this area in 2000. “We create the opportunity for middle school girls to talk about important topics with high school girls who have received special training in facilitation skills and common issues that affect girls.”

Minus the boys and minus the pressure, girls will get to explore themselves and become more comfortable and confident in a safe and relaxed environment.

“There are no pressures to dress a certain way as everyone wears the same t-shirt. There are no boys to make the girls self-conscious. There are older “sisters” who are wiser to the world and share new ideas and hope for the future. They know how to listen and remember how it felt to be a middle school girl,” said Program Coordinator Ksenija Soster Olmer.

This summit is a perfect opportunity for young girls who are going through countless changes and new experiences to get their questions answered and realize that they are far from alone.

“This is a program for all girls, not just for the shy ones or ones having ‘issues’ – and who doesn’t in middle school?” said Olmer. “It is great to come to the summit with a friend, (and) it is great to come alone, be-

cause there is no time or opportunity to feel lonely.”

Many of the current facilitators previously attended the Summit, and gained so much from the experience that they wanted to help give the same experience to younger girls.

“I got so much from the program last year, and it was a fantastic experience for me,” said Katie Holzheimer, who is currently training to be a facilitator for the first time. “(I learned) how to handle certain situations that, without the program, I wouldn’t have been able to.”

“The high school girls are not just trained in important life skills like deep listening, facilitating group discussions, and expanded awareness of themselves and the female experience, but they plan every detail of the summit to make it a great day that the middle school girls will enjoy,” said Burgess.

“(These) high school girls...learn communication skills and working in a group, [and] how to conceive a project and follow it through to completion. In addition, they meet people with different ideas, make new friends, draw on their individual talents, and experience the satisfaction of mentoring young girls,” said Mary Ann McLeod, holder of various positions in the program since its initiation.

“I really looked up to the high school girls, and it was really nice to see that there were other girls in the same boat I was, and they had the same kind of feelings,” said Becky Ware, a second-time facilitator this year who attended the Summit in middle school. “I made some new friends at Sister-to-Sister (in sixth grade), which was nice because I didn’t know a lot of people going in the beginning.”

When the middle school girls fill out surveys at the end of the Summit day, “It’s touching to see how so many of them have been affected by their high school facilitators and the subject matters they were able to discuss,” said American Association of University Women member and active leader in the Sister-to-Sister Summit, Mary Holzheimer. “As a woman, I learned that I need to talk about something in order to understand how I feel about it, and I think that is true for all girls and women. Talking leads to understanding, sharing, and solutions.”

The Sister-to-Sister Summit welcomes all middle school girls to join in a day of celebrating being a girl. “I think each girl leaves the summit feeling good about herself and hopeful about the future. And she knows she is not alone,” said Burgess.

The 2008 Sister-to-Sister Summit will be held at Acalanes High School, Lafayette, on March 15 from 9-3:30. Cost is \$30 and includes lunch and a t-shirt. Preregistration by March 7 is required. Brochures are available online at www.aauwoml.org. For more information, call Valarie Burgess at (925) 376-2517.

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