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## High School Girls Talk about Their Middle School Years

By *Sophie Braccini*

Parents came in large numbers to Orinda Intermediate School on the evening of February 18th to hear a panel of high school girls discuss "the truth about middle school girls." The bulk of their questions ranged from self-esteem, to friend trouble, adaptation to change, the truth about boys and the real high school scene.

The eight students who comprised the panel came from Acalanes, Campolindo, Las Lomas and Miramonte. They are part of the group of girls who will lead the "Sister-to-Sister" summit in March and they have been in training for the summit for the past six months with the American Association of University Women (AAUW).

Middle school is a trying time for girls who want to fit in while everything changes: their bodies, their school, their friends (who sometimes turn against them) and boys (who are entering the picture). It was reassuring for anxious parents to see and talk to 8 diverse and well-adjusted girls who had been through the middle school ordeal and could offer some perspective on what the future holds.

After a short presentation in which the students introduced themselves and evoked briefly their worst and best experience in middle school, Ksenija Olmer, the moderator from AAUW, asked the questions that parents had written on cards.

The first questions addressed survival tips and the boosting of self-esteem. "Branch out, meet new people," recommended Acalanes' Sarah Gilson; "be yourself and don't give in to peer pressure," said Miramonte's Shalini Majumdar; "surround yourself with people who make you feel good about yourself," added Acalanes' Anna Eames. The positive aspect of meeting new people and finding the right group of friends was a theme that came back many times during the evening.

When asked what the girls would change if they could go back to middle school, Las Lomas' Katherine Holzheimer said, "I wish I would have branched out more, rather than staying in my same group of friends," while classmate Jett Gendron added, "I wish I had known that I wasn't alone, that other girls felt like me." Eames said she wished she had known about the Sister-to-Sister summit that AAUW organizes for that purpose, helping middle school girls connect to each other and recognize they are not alone.

Underneath the confident image the panel presented to the crowd, sometimes sadness related to a middle school experience resurfaced. Campolindo's Sarah Mohammed recalled a hurtful event when some of her best friends suddenly turned against her. She recommended that middle school girls be reminded that things change and only get better.

Finding that right group of people is a key to high school happiness, according to the students, and they added that the fluidity between groups lessens the clique problems. "The lines are blurred," said Campolindo's Danielle Booth, "everyone travels between groups."

"Sports help a lot," added Majumdar. The positive impact of participating in sports came back many times for issues as different as friendships and body image. Answering a question from the parent of a very short 6th grader, Holzheimer said, "we have a 4'11" player on our soccer team, she is ferocious, that's who she is and she embraces it."

The concept of being true to yourself and not worrying so much about what others are thinking appeared to be one of the benefits of growing up: "I wish I had known there was not only one behavior, or only one style of shoes that were

acceptable," said Gilson. Mohammed remembered being very concerned about what others were thinking about her appearance and behavior.

Parents' questions shifted to issues regarding boys and sexual behaviors in middle school and beyond. The high school students dismissed almost completely the allegation of promiscuity in middle school. "The biggest deal would be to hold hands," said Booth "and I never felt any pressure about becoming more active." They generally admitted that dating in middle school was more about fitting in than real feelings.

The girls confirmed that in high school the level of sexual activity was much higher, but they all reported having never felt pressured into anything.

Same thing with alcohol and drugs, "it all depends who you hang out with, and it's easy to stay away from it if you want to," said Gendron. They all added that being able to call their parents in sticky situations had been a safety net.

All of the girls acknowledged that open communication with both their parents helped them navigate the middle and high school scenes. "My dad helped me vent," said Gilson, "I always had open communication with my mom," added Booth.

At the end of the evening, parents enthusiastically applauded the panel. "What a great group of young women," said Carol Shenon, the mother of a 6th grade girl, "they really expressed what it was like to be in middle school and gave us a perspective about what to look forward to." Shenon was impressed by the maturity and the long way the girls seem to have gone within just a few years.

"The benefit of that experience is what we want the middle school girls to get during the Sister-to-Sister summit," said Olmer, "it creates a bridge and a perspective for the younger ones, during a day that's divided between fun activities and group discussions."

The Sister-to-Sister summit will be held at OIS on March 7th from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Pre-registration is required, call (925) 942-0102.

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