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Program Focuses on Coping with Betrayal and Pain in Middle School

By Sophie Braccini



Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School participants in the Communication Skills for Girls workshop. Photo provided

When you ask high school girls from the Sister-to-Sister series – a life skills program for middle school girls offered by the Lamorinda branch of the American Association of University Women – about the most painful memories of their years in middle school, half of the time their response is “betrayal” – betrayal by girls who they thought were their closest friends.

One Miramonte High School senior’s worst experience in middle school was that suddenly her best friends stopped talking with her on the phone and stopped inviting her to hangout. When confronted about it, they started sending awful texts and putting her down.

Another Miramonte senior, who also asked not to be named, was part of a very close knit group of friends and was ostracized one day when one of the girls said that their group was “too exclusive” and it was that girl’s fault. The same thing happened to an Acalanes High School senior one day in middle school when she heard that her friends were hiding in the bathroom because they didn’t want to hang out with her anymore. “It was a metaphorical punch to my gut,” she recalls.

A Bentley Upper School junior adds that throughout sixth and seventh grade she can’t remember a day when her “friends” weren’t saying things like, “You’re pathetic” or “You’re a selfish brat,” or “No one cares.”

“Being turned off by friends is one of the worst feelings a young girl can experience in her early teenage

years,” she says.

Tween and early teen years can be hard for growing girls, and can result in a culture that’s confusing for young women. Moraga School District Superintendent Bruce Burns asked AAUW’s Valarie Burgess, who’s been managing the Sister-to-Sister project in Lamorinda for 15 years, to offer a multi-week program for female Joaquin Intermediate School students to work on communication issues and healthy relationships. The pilot program, called Communication Skills for Girls, was held in the fall; the Sister-to-Sister summit scheduled March 22 is a one-day opportunity for young girls to experience how to better navigate the emotional roads of middle school.

The programs offered are managed by high school facilitators – local high school girls who can testify to the difficulty of middle school years and to the better times that lie ahead. They are trained by AAUW members year-round.

“The purpose of the six-week program at JM is to empower girls and raise their emotional intelligence,” says Burgess. “It teaches healthy communication and relationship skills, raises awareness of negative cultural and social messages, and helps the girls to be resilient and proficient advocates for themselves and their peers.” Burgess designed the program with Laura L. Wittenberg, a marriage and family therapist, based on their participation in the Rachel Simmons’ Boston Girls Leadership Institute.

“People who act mean are some-

times the most insecure, and they are the ones who would need help,” says Miramonte senior Elizabeth Chenok, who was a facilitator. “The girls who work with us learn techniques to identify and handle their own emotions, without lashing out or being overwhelmed.” The senior thinks that middle school is a time of change and insecurity, when all people desperately want is to fit in.

April Tabler, a sixth grader at JM, participated in the program. “We had a lot of fun learning new skills,” she says. “We practiced the ‘I’ statement – when you say what you feel rather than accusing someone about what they did – or how to identify and defuse ‘pushing’ statements. We learned how to avoid being bullied and we made new friends.”

April’s mother, Sarah Tabler, appreciated the information session that was held for parents before the series started, and the follow-up emails sent every week to reinforce what the girls were learning. “They learned to avoid using ‘always’ and ‘never,’” she says. “They learned how to name emotions, recognize feelings. They also discussed the importance of having your own thoughts and being your authentic self.”

Burgess hopes to offer a second Communication Skills for Girls session starting in April. All the girls who participated in the first program have been invited to the March 22 Sister-to-Sister summit, held from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on the Bentley High School campus in Lafayette. For more information or to register, go to oml-ca.aauw.net/s2s/.

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MOFD Updates GIS Evacuation Maps

By Cathy Dausman



Uriel Garcia and Dennis Rein discuss evacuation routes in Orinda’s Sleepy Hollow neighborhood. Their map is a print version of the GIS overlay system they are building. Photo Cathy Dausman

Usually residents want to get into their neighborhood, but there are times, and situations, where the goal is getting out. A flood, wildfire or hazardous material spill may make a neighborhood uninhabitable and evacuation imperative. This is why the Moraga-Orinda Fire District is utilizing computer technology to pre-plan local evacuation routes. The goal is to update the MOFD area GIS, or geographic information system, allowing first responders to identify

safe exit routes and trouble shoot traffic control “choke points” – potential traffic jam locations – ahead of a real disaster, said Emergency Preparedness Coordinator Dennis Rein.

In 2013, Rein and MOFD intern Uriel Garcia worked to electronically note the location of the area’s every fire hydrant, fire trail, and street. Garcia also uploaded parcel map information, the location of Central Sanitary (sewer) lines, East Bay Municipal Utility District water lines,

local creeks, streams, and other hazards. Gas main information from PG&E is yet to be added.

The job was a good fit for Garcia, who describes himself as “a big picture kind of guy.”

This information, and much more, can be layered into the GIS system, the way celluloid pages built the “visible man” in printed reference books. Each layer can be turned on or off as needed. To illustrate GIS use, Garcia showed how a simulated fire might grow from the Bear Creek trail – along the shore of Briones Reservoir – and progress south toward Orinda’s Sleepy Hollow School. The location was picked because Sleepy Hollow neighborhood will soon become one of Contra Costa County’s first Firewise (wildfire community preparedness, www.firewise.org) communities.

“GIS is a lifestyle program; it needs to be kept up,” Rein said. MOFD started its evacuation route mapping back in 2006-07 under then fire marshal Tonya Hoover, who is now the California state fire marshal. She said the initial effort was tied into the California Fire Safe program (<http://www.cafiresafecouncil.org/>), with data layers intended for use by fire response responders.

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