

GIVING GUIDANCE

Ophelia Project provides valuable mentors for Palm Springs area girls

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Too many young girls live without role models or a safety net. But they live with the fear that they're not good enough. The Ophelia Project works with girls in Coachella Valley to address just that. The program creates learning environments that promote confidence, healthy behaviors and wellness. It encourages students to stay in school and be academically successful. Ophelia Girls receive insight from seasoned, adult mentors with the practical knowledge that these young women are looking for.

The program is part of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Foundation, a non-profit in Palm Desert. Ophelia is currently active in 20 area schools and has served more than 7,000 girls to date. Participation has resulted in a 100% graduation rate and encourages college preparation and career readiness.

"Our beautiful Coachella Valley has challenges," said Peter K. Sturgeon, Ophelia Project president and chief executive officer. "One in 12 students will drop out of high school. We believe that the success of adolescent girls is integral to overcoming obstacles like generational poverty. Our empathic volunteer mentors go into schools and our girls' trajectory improves drastically. ... Ophelia Girls learn about goals and self-worth. They graduate from high school with a plan for what's next."

The word around school campuses about the Ophelia Project is encouraging. "The girls become motivated, self-assured and willing to take on challenges," said Kelly May-Vollmar, superintendent of Desert Sands Unified School District. "Girls in the program model kindness, leadership, and resilience. Schools with Ophelia groups often see stronger peer connections and a better overall environment."

School counselors recommend girls for Ophelia who might benefit from positive learning experiences and support. Participants can start in 8th grade and continue through their senior year. Mentoring sessions occur at the schools, during school hours, and are at the invitation of each school district. Lessons focus on academics and well-being and incorporate three proven



Ophelia ambassadors join together for a group shot in 2024.



CV Firebirds mascot Fuego poses with Ophelia ambassadors at a City of La Quinta celebration in 2024.

tools for anxiety and stress relief: journaling, positive affirmations and meditation skills training.

Lupe Gonzalez-Mares, a counselor at Thomas Jefferson Middle School, recognizes the challenges teenage girls face. "They're struggling with anxiety, depression and body image issues, which are exacerbated by social media." She sees the ways the program helps these students make better choices. "They become leaders and shape the next gener-

ation of female changemakers."

Mentors serve as positive role models and create a safe environment for self-discovery. They come from all walks of life. They're good listeners, responsible, non-judgmental, trustworthy and supportive.

Wallis Raemer became a mentor through a friend. "Now, I'm a team leader at Shadow Hills High School, with seven mentors and more than 40 mentees," she said. As a former educator with 45+ years of experience, Raemar hopes to inspire Ophelia girls "to deal with roadblocks, transcend traditional and cultural roles and pursue their goals."

Eighth grader Heli Vicente participates in Ophelia at Thomas Jefferson and talks enthusiastically about her mentor, Gabi Mendoza. "Ms. Gabi has taught me to go for what I want. I've learned about communication and expressing my needs. And about teamwork, which has helped me be more open-minded and make new friends." Mendoza even encouraged Heli to try out for the soccer team. "And I'm so glad I did," she said.

"I joined when I was 13," said Rachel Sanchez, a Shadow Hills High School Ophelia alumna, "and found myself counting the days to the next meeting. The program gave me the confidence to embrace who I am and a community I

can count on." Sanchez learned that leadership is not about being the loudest in the room. "It's about creating an environment where others feel valued."

Mia Gutierrez also had the "honor of being a part of the Ophelia Project," with Raemer as her mentor. "I talked to her about literally anything," Gutierrez said. "From wanting to be more involved at school, to breakups, to what to do with my future." Raemer suggested that she become an Ophelia Ambassador and represent the program at community events. "I learned how to network, host meetings and use my voice to advocate for myself and others."

Now a freshman at UC Irvine, Gutierrez says she joined a sorority, because the Ophelia Project taught her that "sisterhood is important."

The Ophelia Project has been a game-changer for so many of our young girls. Sanchez summarized it best: "As a first-generation student facing many barriers and hurdles, Ophelia became my guiding light, connecting me with incredible opportunities and mentors. It continues to illuminate my future, reminding me that the sky's the limit!"

To learn more about The Ophelia Project, visit jfkfoundation.org.

Sergio Garcia enjoys writing about the good people that do great things in our community. Contact him at sergio071364@aol.com.



La Quinta Mayor Linda Evans poses with Ophelia ambassadors on Veterans Day 2023.



Ophelia girls gather at the 2024 Palm Desert Golf Cart Parade. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE OPHELIA PROJECT