

Stars Guides At-Risk Youth to Shining Success

By **Camila Castellanos** August 15, 2019

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Photo courtesy Stars | Stars nonprofit organization seeks to curb high school dropout rates and help students thrive by supporting local, low-income youth with a multitude of supportive services and after-school and summer enrichment programs.

They say a child can never be loved too much, and the Stars nonprofit organization is out to prove it.

Using the “it takes a village” mantra, Stars has created a community of caring adults to support vulnerable youth and their families in Pasadena, providing tangible tools to help them thrive academically, emotionally, economically and spiritually.

Formerly called the Lake Avenue Community Foundation, Stars has reached more than 1,000 area youth since 2001 with tutoring, mentoring, counseling and multitiered enrichment programs, becoming an established part of the northwest Pasadena educational community. The nonprofit serves low-income students who have few resources, helping curb public school dropout rates and guiding young people to complete post-secondary education.

“In order for students to thrive, it takes more than a school or a parent. It takes community-based solutions to provide a holistic support system,” said Stars Executive Director Nancy Stiles. “Our goal is to help local youth achieve their highest hopes and become thriving, stable adults. We are creating change at a systemic level and providing resources that help make dreams a reality.”

Stars’ methods are tried and true. To date, the nonprofit has achieved high school graduation rates of 100% among its mentored members, underpinned with a total of more than 9,000 hours of tutoring and mentoring annually to about 200 students and their families. Another 80% of its members have gone on to a community college or a four-year university.

‘STARS FOR TOMORROW’

Stars’ annual benefit, held at an elegant Pasadena estate, will include a social hour and silent auction, followed by dinner and heartening stories of the Stars community.

WHEN:

Thursday, Sept. 19, at 6 p.m.

HOW TO HELP:

To support Stars and its mission, community members can purchase tickets or provide sponsorships to the gala by visiting starsfortomorrow.com.

Vital to the nonprofit’s success rates are some core programs: Stars After School offers intensive homework and life skills support for grades K-12 at four locations. The program provides academic assistance with specialized tutoring, college counseling, strategic academic planning and enrichment activities.

Another, newer effort, the Stars College Program, is preparing students for college and helping to keep them enrolled until they complete a bachelor’s degree. The nonprofit meets students regularly to make sure they are on track academically

while also supporting their emotional needs, as many are low-income, first-generation college students who may not have familial support or financial backing.

College success coordinator Amy Cardenas, an alumna of the Stars program — she started back when she was in 2nd grade — has zeroed in on helping students who were just like her younger self. She's busy on social media, keeping up with some 65 students and continually sending thoughtful messages or words of encouragement. This past year, she began a care-package project for out-of-town collegians. Many of her students have seen peers receive the coveted care packages, and the absence of their own can create a depressing reminder of how marginalized they feel in the new environment.

"There are a lot more students of color enrolling into more college programs, but they're not all graduating. ... The reason is only 50% of a successful college experience comes from academics. The other 50% is social," Cardenas said. "We are seeing kids from lower socioeconomic classes face obstacles of not belonging. They're lonely — they just don't feel like they fit in."

Most of her college-student members hold down intensive part-time jobs, too, adding to the stress of keeping on top of rigorous academics and leaving less time to socialize.

"It's just one more thing that changes the experience for them compared to all the rest," said Cardenas. "We want to encourage them, to help them keep this going. I try to relay that our experiences as a person of color make us resilient and unique. ... We can use that in the classroom."

Cardenas has adopted programs for the parents of first-generation college students as well, educating them on the rigorous demands of college and advising them to temper familial obligations when possible.

As a faith-based nonprofit, Stars taps into "strength in faith," although its services are open to all and there is no religious requirement to participate. However, helping youth grow in their spiritual journey is part of treating the holistic well-being of the individuals and their families, the nonprofit emphasizes.

Another program that has made great strides in reaching youth is Stars Mentoring. The program provides one-to-one mentoring between an adult and student, providing a consistent and caring mentor to help prepare a young person for all of life's emotional, social, spiritual and vocational transitions.

Stars has created a team of eight mentor-teaching "coaches" from differing professional backgrounds to help train about 60 mentors, who develop lifelong relationships with some 70 students starting in 5th grade. The mentor volunteers are successful across a broad range of professions and include artists, producers, musicians, engineers and scientists.

OUTLOOK file photo

Pasadena resident Lena Kennedy is pictured with Stars board chair Marah Lyvers and Nancy Stiles, executive director of the organization, which has reached more than 1,000 area youth since 2001 with tutoring, mentoring, counseling and multitiered enrichment programs.

"The goal is to match loving, caring, responsible and equipped adults in the community with children from [the Pasadena Unified School District] to walk alongside a young person," said Domingo Mota, director of mentoring initiatives. "We call it 'expanding possibilities' — students have a better chance of success with community support. Mentoring works; we know it does. We owe it to every generation to make sure each individual has a mentor in his or her life."

Mota works hard to match students with mentors on the basis of their interests, and he's proud of growing a mentoring team with a wide range of ages, from 21 to 80. He's expressed the benefits of the mentor relationship go both ways, helping to expand the lives of both people involved.

"We ask the mentors to approach this humbly and be prepared to learn — the stretching has to go both ways," he added.

One such mentor has been his brother, Jose Mota, who began mentoring a young man several years ago. The student was struggling, with an incarcerated father and a mother whose absence at home was noted as she fought to make ends meet. Mentor and student would meet over coffee, and while sometimes they would broach sensitive personal topics, Jose Mota felt the way he helped most was just by giving a listening ear and encouragement. To the boy's credit, he was a resolute worker and also held down a job all the way through school, Jose Mota noted proudly.

The boy has grown into a young man, but they still text regularly.

"I recommend the mentoring path to anyone and everyone; it allows you to be connected to another side of yourself. ... My own growth has come through having a more open mind and relating to what so many of our youngsters are facing on a

daily basis," Jose Mota said. "I've grown in being a better listener, father, and as a Christian, by applying my faith to something so tangible and in a way previously unknown to me."

Going forward, Stars plans to expand its reach and continue to help underserved youth of all ages and their families, working to engage the entire family of a student member.

"By working together and learning from one another, we collectively shift from an isolated island struggling to survive to a thriving interdependent community where all lives display evidence of God-given potential," Stars writes on its website.

To learn more about Stars, or volunteer or donate, visit its website at gostars.org.

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