

PASADENA Outlook

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Stars Align to Prepare Kids for the Future

By Jonathan Williams
The Outlook

Stars, a Pasadena-based nonprofit organization founded in 2001, has helped hundreds of underserved children from the ages of 5 to 18 to prepare them for their educational futures.

The organization offers students community-based programs, such as tutoring, mentoring, summer enrichment, college assistance and counseling, and classes for social skills along with parenting.

The nonprofit provides more than 9,000 hours of tutoring and mentoring each year to more than 200 students and their families, achieving a 99% high school graduation rate. It also often runs community-based programs at after-school sites.

Stars also offers a variety of services dedicated to helping the community in Pasadena, such as wellness fairs and workshops. In celebration of Mental Health Awareness Month in May, it hosted workshops that were made possible by a recent grant they received.

"I work with a lot of students who are socially misunderstood," said Maria Sosa, a Stars intern who is working toward her master's degree in social work. "I think Stars is doing a wonderful job to try and break that stigma of mental health. It gives our youth a space to speak their feelings and be vulnerable, which is very important."

She said the pandemic caused a significant gap in social development for many of today's youth who were forced to experience two crucial academic years



Photo by Giancarlo Diaz / OUTLOOK

Stars board Chair Hazel Perera, Executive Director Matu Taylor and former Executive Director Nancy Stiles have played key roles in the Pasadena-based nonprofit organization which provides more than 9,000 hours of tutoring and mentoring to students, nearly all of whom attend PUSD schools.

learning through virtual platforms, missing out on the typical experiences of in-person learning. Sosa can relate.

"I had a hard time when I was younger," she said. "I grew up in a Mexican household. We didn't believe in mental health. I had to figure out everything myself. It's rewarding for me to be able to help those families through that process."

Janet Wilson, who began vol-

unteering with Stars nearly a decade ago, shared the same sentiments.

"I want to help vulnerable people," Wilson said.

Wilson, who earned a bachelor's degree at Amherst College and a master's in social work from USC, is currently the counseling program coordinator at Stars. As a social worker, she said she has a passion for the work she does, highlighting the dozens of fami-

lies she gets to help daily.

In addition to the academic assistance the students receive, Stars also provides food to its "community of families" it serves on Tuesdays. About 20 to 25 families receive fresh produce, protein and dairy on a regular basis. During a recent day when food was distributed, family members lamented how the cost of food has risen dramatically.

"This experience [with Stars] has helped me and my family," said Leobarda Alonso, a single mother who has struggled with food insecurity.

Hazel Perera, the chair of Stars' board of directors, who graduated from Maranatha High School and then Westmont College, said she has "a soft spot for her to raise kids," noting that her mother had "sacrificed to put food on the table."

She added that it is "very satisfying to be part of a community that's all working toward the same mission. It's hard to find out there in the world, outside of doing something like this. I see it as a privilege more than anything — that I get to be a part of this amazing organization. Anything I can do to help, sign me up!"

Parera added that hiring Stars' executive director, Matumaini Taylor, last year was critical to the organization's continued success.

Prior to joining Stars, Taylor

was the director of high school and college age outreach at Faithful Central Bible Church in Inglewood, bringing 20 years of experience spanning work in ministry, nonprofits and public administration.

She said her journey has led her to work with young people, feeling a sense of obligation and emphasizing the importance of service work.

"I speak of this opportunity to serve at Stars as an alignment of sorts," Taylor said. "These various components of my life that I couldn't have planned if I tried. Yet there's a sense of convergence coming here for me. There was a saying I always heard in church: 'Service is the price you pay for the space you occupy.'"

At its core, Stars' shining achievement is exemplified through the volunteers and employees, who play key roles in the tutoring, mentoring and wellness of the students.

"I hope to inspire young people to see community as value, creating and maintaining a safety net for our society ... the life of the heart is where life really shines," said Adán Williams, a 1978 graduate of Blair High School who has served as Stars' director of wellness and mentoring initiatives. "My family has always been engaged. I feel like service is what makes life meaningful."



Photo courtesy Stars

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