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Oct 13, 2006

Girls meet to make a change

By Banks Albach

The 1,400 teenage girls who took over a massive conference hall in San Jose on Thursday are sick of the gangs, drugs and abuse that many of them face or see their friends battle.

So, they're doing something about it with the help of a nonprofit - Girls for a Change - that empowers them to change their communities through the guidance of adult women.

"It's just amazing - I got totally sucked in," said Laura Damian, 18, who will graduate soon from Mountain View High School. Damian sits on the steering committee that organized the summit.

The nonprofit held its fourth summit Thursday in the San Jose Convention Center. Cupertino High School, East Palo Alto Charter School and Mountain View High School helped sponsor the event, which drew students from 21 Bay Area schools.

Girls for a Change offers more of a how-to guide than a rigid program. The nonprofit focuses on the problems teenage girls face and then provides them with the tools they need to launch their own project to change their community, said executive director and founder Whitney Smith.

"I'm seeing a light go off in them when you ask: 'What do you care about?'" she said. "They go from being apathetic in the perception of adults to being leaders."

In her first project with the group, Damian and 14 friends raised about \$2,000 to fund music, dance and art programs in local schools. Since then, they've also built a DVD combating the problems behind sexual stereotypes that girls see on TV, she said.

A group of girls from East Palo Alto, who attend Addison Elementary School in Palo Alto, attended Thursday's summit, hoping to learn - and have fun.

"It's a good experience," Tia Genetiano, 13, said.

Victoria Ita, 12, agreed.

"It's fun because it makes girls get going," she said.

Smith started Girls for a Change in 2000 with about 300 Bay Area students. Now she's close to taking the nonprofit to the national level, she said. Her organization raised \$1 million this year from individuals, foundations and businesses. The money goes to support the dozens of girl teams working on projects throughout the year. At the summit, a Palo Alto group of girls wrote and directed a skit on self-esteem with the help of young girls in juvenile hall.

Another group from East Palo Alto made anti-drug posters and started a letter campaign to music producers encouraging them to remove references to drugs in their music.

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Victor Maccharoli / Daily News

A group of girls from San Jose dance during a break dancing workshop at the girls summit held by Girls for a Change at the San Jose Convention Center on Thursday. Over 1,300 junior high and high school girls from San Jose to San Francisco attended the summit.

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