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# Lamorinda Schools

## Local Grad Student/Coach Reaches Out to Kids with Special Needs

By Jennifer Wake



Special Needs kids and family members cheer on the Gaels on Jan. 19. Photo Andrew Verducci

When Saint Mary's College graduate student Andrew Verducci accepted a request to add two developmentally disabled basketball players to his 8th grade roster at Orinda Intermediate School (OIS) last year, he saw it as a way for him and the other players to learn about the struggles and successes of children with special needs. But that was only the start.

OIS Athletic Director Mike Agers approached Verducci to see if he would be willing to add Spencer (who has autism) and Daniel (who has Down Syndrome) to his basketball team. Verducci said he was 'up to the task.' Although Daniel had

played on a Special Olympics basketball team before, neither player had ever played on a team with their typical peers.

"The team greeted them with open arms," Verducci said. "My message to the team was, Daniel and Spencer are just like you guys and they will be treated as every person should be treated: with respect."

Although Daniel and Spencer's mothers told Verducci their sons could sit out (they were just happy to be part of the team), Verducci said: "If they're on my team and in uniform, they're going to play no matter what."

Near the half of game one, Verducci looked down the bench

and called out Daniel's name. "He looked up at me and gave me this look of shock," he said. "I explained to him that he was going in. He paused, and just gave me the biggest smile and said, 'Thank you.' When he checked into the game and ran on the court, the crowd ignited." Later it was Spencer's turn.

With one minute left in the game, Verducci told Spencer he was going in. "When he entered the game, instead of going to where he was supposed to, Spencer decided to shake everyone's hand and ask how they were doing. Before I went to remind him where he was supposed to be, I stopped to admire him. He showed me how to cherish the moment."

Over the course of the season the team bonded with the two players. "There were games that we were down by 20 points, but that never stopped [the team] from cheering on Daniel and Spencer," Verducci said.

At a game against Stanley Middle School, Spencer had a moment to shine.

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## The Ninth Annual Sister-To-Sister Summit: A Day for Middle School Girls

By Anna Eames, Acalanes Class of 2009, 2008 Sister-To-Sister Facilitator



2007 Summit participants with facilitator Helen Wang (right)

Photo provided

Picture a bunch of teenage girls getting together on the weekend: big room, colorful decorations, comfortable and friendly atmosphere, and nonstop girl talk about everything teen girls think about, from relationships, to pressures, to body image.

Now consider that same situation, but focused on reaching solutions for the all too common issues that preteen girls face.

This is the Sister-to-Sister Summit: an annual event made by girls, for girls. "The Sister-to-Sister Summit is an entire day for girls to just be girls and talk about girl stuff," said co-chair of the Sister-to-Sister Summit program, Valarie Burgess, who initiated the annual tradition of the program in this area in 2000. "We create the opportunity for middle school girls to talk about important topics with high school girls who have received special training in facilitation skills and common issues that affect girls."

Minus the boys and minus the pressure, girls will get to explore themselves and become more comfortable and confident in a safe and relaxed environment.

"There are no pressures to dress a certain way as everyone wears the same t-shirt. There are no boys to make the girls self-conscious. There are older "sisters" who are wiser to the world and share new ideas and hope for the future. They know how to listen and remember how it felt to be a middle school girl," said Program Coordinator Ksenija Soster Olmer.

This summit is a perfect opportunity for young girls who are going through countless changes and new experiences to get their questions answered

and realize that they are far from alone.

"This is a program for all girls, not just for the shy ones or ones having 'issues' - and who doesn't in middle school?" said Olmer. "It is great to come to the summit with a friend, (and) it is great to come alone, because there is no time or opportunity to feel lonely."

Many of the current facilitators previously attended the Summit, and gained so much from the experience that they wanted to help give the same experience to younger girls.

"I got so much from the program last year, and it was a fantastic experience for me," said Katie Holzheimer, who is currently training to be a facilitator for the first time. "(I learned) how to handle certain situations that, without the program, I wouldn't have been able to."

"The high school girls are not just trained in important life skills like deep listening, facilitating group discussions, and expanded awareness of themselves and the female experience, but they plan every detail of the summit to make it a great day that the middle school girls will enjoy," said Burgess.

"(These) high school girls...learn communication skills and working in a group, [and] how to conceive a project and follow it through to completion. In addition, they meet people with different ideas, make new friends, draw on their individual talents, and experience the satisfaction of mentoring young girls," said Mary Ann McLeod, holder of various positions in the program since its initiation.

"I really looked up to the high school girls, and it was really nice to see that there were other girls in the same boat I

was, and they had the same kind of feelings," said Becky Ware, a second-time facilitator this year who attended the Summit in middle school. "I made some new friends at Sister-to-Sister (in sixth grade), which was nice because I didn't know a lot of people going in the beginning."

When the middle school girls fill out surveys at the end of the Summit day, "It's touching to see how so many of them have been affected by their high school facilitators and the subject matters they were able to discuss," said American Association of University Women member and active leader in the Sister-to-Sister Summit, Mary Holzheimer. "As a woman, I learned that I need to talk about something in order to understand how I feel about it, and I think that is true for all girls and women. Talking leads to understanding, sharing, and solutions."

The Sister-to-Sister Summit welcomes all middle school girls to join in a day of celebrating being a girl. "I think each girl leaves the summit feeling good about herself and hopeful about the future. And she knows she is not alone," said Burgess.

The 2008 Sister-to-Sister Summit will be held at Acalanes High School, Lafayette, on March 15 from 9-3:30. Cost is \$30 and includes lunch and a t-shirt. Preregistration by March 7 is required. Brochures are available online at [www.aauwoml.org](http://www.aauwoml.org). For more information, call Valarie Burgess at (925) 376-2517.

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## Jazzy Fundraiser at the Orinda House

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A quintet of young girls leaning over the mezzanine level watching the musicians, and a blazing fire from the brick pizza oven, gave the place a homey feel. The lobby area morphed into a bit of a playground and dance floor for some of the squirly younger patrons that night.

Not only is it one of the few venues in the area that hosts live entertainment, but the Orinda House, also has a separate kids' menu that appeared to be a great fit for the elementary students in attendance. As a parent, what really stands out on the kids' menu is, "The kitchen is always happy to accommodate special requests when possible." Classic child-friendly choices include a kid size burger, chicken tenders, penne pasta, macaroni and cheese, along with mini-pizza.

The music, full bar, grown-up menu, and large flat screen TV, hit the right notes for adults. Choices ranged from appetizers like calamari, crab cakes and bruschetta and more, along with soup and a variety of salads. Main courses featured grilled rib eye or flatiron steak, salmon, cioppino, chicken marsala, a pair of pasta dishes, a sirloin burger and a number of pizzas.

The restaurant has a unique layout, in that quite a few tables are toward the front of the establishment, separated by a partial glass wall. On nights when live music is playing, diners are welcome to sit in this section. But for those wanting to be up closer to the high caliber entertainment, some of the same musicians that play Yoshi's, there is an \$8.00 surcharge that will be applied to the City of Orinda's Commercial Live Entertainment Use Permit.

"Jazz compliments the dining experience," said Orinda House Owner Ron Bonner, who opened the restaurant in January of 2006. He encourages area residents to support local retail establishments, to make Orinda vibrant and to add to the sales tax, a portion of which goes to fix local roads.