

Chung: Peace, one girl at a time

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The PowerPoint presentation had 31 carefully crafted slides. The Web site was updated. Each of Girls Helping Girls' four board members spoke in their 35-minute fundraising pitch to the Los Gatos Rotary Club.

Leaving almost no angle ignored, the fledgling group's leaders were so impressive last month that the Rotarians started offering up pledges on the spot.

Oh, and one more thing: Those board members are all still wearing high school uniforms.

"I always tell them, 'I'm not going to take your money and buy an iPod,'" said Sejal Hathi, the 16-year-old founder and chief executive - who's also a junior at Notre Dame High School in San Jose. More like books and school supplies for underprivileged girls across the Third World.

"Girls" is Sejal's brainchild. And her board members are her fellow juniors at the all-girls school. Besides juggling debate tournaments or SAT cram sessions, they also juggle their passion for their projects, which stretch from Ghana to Calcutta, India.

"Seriously, this kid and this project, is just over the top," said Notre Dame Principal Mary Beth Riley, who helped Sejal with her non-profit's organizational structure after the idea was already well on its way.

Learning as they go

Youth, though, is both an advantage and a disadvantage in explaining to adults how they want to change the world, one girl at a time - through education, leadership training, community projects and cultural awareness. "Empower a girl, empower her nation" is on their logo.

And youthful energy can't cover all bases. Last week, they asked another group, One World Children's Fund, to act as their fiscal agent while they await tax-exempt status from the IRS. Grilled about accountability, they recognized they needed to add some adult co-signers to their bank account - this weekend.

But the girls have worked hard to master their subject, like the smart, college-aspiring kids they are, and it's clear they've got the lingo down, too.

They talk about "core values" and their adoption of four of the "U.N. Millennium Development Goals." They explain how the curriculum guides they wrote are aimed at understanding today's global challenges, and how their "social change kits" will help girls make a difference in their own communities.

There's also a fifth goal, said Sandal Khandoker, 17, vice president and global outreach director, describing it as "our personal touch: peace."

Three countries

So far, they are working with girls in India, Turkey and Ghana. They've paired each group of girls overseas with a group of girls in the United States who communicate via e-mail and will advise on an improvement project in each community. In May, the

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girls will leave for Calcutta to furnish the small library of a children's center run by another non-profit organization, Promise World Wide.

"It's great to be part of something so new and radical, that you don't have to go through grown-ups," said Angelica Teng, 17, the creative director for Girls Helping Girls. "These are girls actually connecting with each other."

The smiling faces of the girls on their Web site? "They're real people," she said, girls they're helping and with whom they exchange e-mails.

Sejal cut her teeth in middle school with the Girls For a Change, a national group that teaches leadership and how to create projects to better one's community. That taught her so much, she said, as she took on a Darfur awareness project, and then a self-esteem summit for girls. She is now on the national board of Girls For a Change.

Then, Sejal said, she had "an epiphany" about how to make difference. Poverty, corruption, environmental degradation and poor education were deep problems that needed addressing. But key was igniting human potential to lead and make change, she thought. All girls can transform their world, if given the tools. Who better to help than their peers?

The group keeps finding new ways to achieve its mission. Over Presidents' Day weekend, in between studying for the SATs, Angelica spent hours with another student adding a special "donate" button to the group's site.

That's not to say the girls don't raise money the old-fashioned way. In the past six months, they've organized efforts like "Trick or Treat for Change," tenaciously solicited their friends and relatives, held a book drive and collected ink cartridges and cell phones for recycling, said 17-

year-old Hanna Kim, the group's financial manager and fundraising director. They also got a big boost when Riley, their principal, awarded the group a \$5,000 grant. For a group just spreading its wings, that was a big deal, bringing their funds to \$9,000.

Sejal, who also finds time to practice with a hip-hop dance team, professes she doesn't know what typical 16-year-olds are supposed to do. But, she says, she's always liked this quote: "Reach for the moon, and if you miss, you'll at least land among the stars."

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