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Herhold: Student scholar empowers girls, inspires adults

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When you read Sejal Hathi's résumé, the first question that arises is: what didn't she do? Founder of an international nonprofit, a speaker before the World Bank, Presidential Scholar, a veteran in microfinance, participant in a discussion with the Dalai Lama — the graduating senior from San Jose's Notre Dame High School has packed more into her slender years than most people do into a lifetime. And she's not yet 18.

When I attended Amphitheater High School in Tucson, Ariz., many years ago, a decent track record consisted of playing on a varsity team, excelling academically and participating in extracurriculars like the yearbook or drama.

Nobody thought then about reversing the plight of kids in India or finding a cure for disease. But as my son graduated from Bellarmine last weekend, I realized that a few kids have taken their games to a very different level. One Bellarmine grad isolated a gene for cancer. One spoke almost as eloquently as President Barack Obama. A dozen were headed for Harvard, Princeton, Yale or Stanford.

Even in that environment, Sejal stands out. The 5-foot-tall Fremont girl, whose father is an engineer and whose mother is an immigration attorney, has become an international figure by founding Girls Helping Girls. It's a nonprofit that, among other things, raises money for scholarships, shares curricula across borders and encourages girls to combat sex trafficking. (See href="http://www.

empoweragirl.org">www.empoweragirl.org .)

Visit to India

On a trip in August to Kolkata, India, she helped build a library, organized two peacemaking summits for girls in red-light districts and developed a way for small contributions to help start businesses for women.

Her mentors describe her as a little shy but brave, willing to call up a CEO to ask for help. "I always feel incredibly nervous, because they know I'm young," she told me. "But because I'm passionate, I believe that will radiate through."

"I've never encountered a student like Sejal," says Notre Dame's principal, Mary Beth Riley. "When she asked for my help in developing this nonprofit, she'd take me to banks and say that somebody from Texas was going to call me about a reference. I thought, 'How do you even know how to get started in that?' "

International visitor

When Sejal attended a World Bank conference in Washington, D.C., last fall, she met the first female Latin American prime minister, Beatriz Merino of Peru. At Sejal's invitation, Merino came to Notre Dame to talk to students in November. Meanwhile, as one of two Presidential Scholars from California, Sejal will meet Obama next month.

Yet you have a sense that she hasn't totally forgotten how to be a teenager, either. When I reached her, Sejal was riding a bus to Disneyland with her Notre Dame classmates. She sheepishly confessed that she had brought along a heavy-duty book — and had been reminded to lighten up.

The odd thing about all this is that Sejal, who is

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headed to Yale in the fall, is not really driven by her parents. Her teachers say her drive comes from somewhere deep inside, nourished by compassion.

A standout scholar, Sejal had essentially completed the high school curriculum by the end of her sophomore year. "I came in that summer and said, 'Does anyone have a plan for Sejal?' " Riley remembers. "Little did I know that she had a plan for us."

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