COMMUNITY

CHAC breakfast celebrates 45 years of behavioral health support

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Written by Los Altos Town Crier Staff - Town Crier Staff Report

Last week’s inaugural breakfast fundraiser for CHAC (Community Health Awareness Council) raised $44,000 and provided an effective overview of the nonprofit organization’s work. Now in its 45th year, CHAC serves as an “emotional safety net” for local communities.

Titled “Changing Lives Together,” the March 28 event at the LinkedIn Corp. campus in Mountain View drew 220 guests representing school districts, local law enforcement and civic leaders, among others.

Executive Director Marsha Deslauriers said CHAC has helped thousands of students and families with behavioral health problems since its inception in 1973. The agency’s counselors work in 34 K-12 schools across four districts, including the Los Altos School District and the Mountain View Los Altos Union High School District.

“We’re not just an agency – we’re an institution,” said CHAC’s chief administrator of the past 18 months.

Deslauriers estimated that CHAC worked last year with 14 percent of the total schools population in the areas of Los Altos, Mountain View and Sunnyvale where it provides services – a 2 percent increase over the year before.

CHAC’S WORK

CHAC’s support services address myriad issues, including anxiety, grief, depression and addiction – children “acting out” and disrupting classrooms as well as those “acting in” with suppressed problems less obvious and harder to address.

“What happens in the life of a 9-year-old, where they’re dark, dismal and very depressed?” Deslauriers asked the audience.

She said CHAC counselors experience success helping troubled children when they recognize their strengths and “replace darkness with joy.”

In addition to serving students, CHAC fills a need for local families that earn too much to qualify for Medi-Cal help but can’t afford a private-practice therapist. Deslauriers said CHAC charges for its services on a sliding fee scale to ensure that everyone has access to the help they need.

She touched on CHAC’s training program, which enables 75-80 clinicians to intern in various stages of preparation for their master’s degrees and doctorates, under the supervision of 14 marriage and family therapists. Deslauriers noted that many of the interns are pursuing second careers, with an average age of 39.

“They all have significant life experience,” she said, with an average of 10 years in another field and at least one other advanced degree.

Deslauriers described the interns embarking on their second careers as “passionate and committed.”

Angela Alvarado discusses the social media challenges today’s parents face at CHAC’s March 28 breakfast fundraiser. Bruce Barton/Town Crier
MODERN-DAY CHALLENGES

Additional stressors CHAC professionals see these days include anxiety among some families over the threat of deportation and the cyberbullying that comes with rampant use of smartphones and social media access.

“How can you learn when you have this kind of fear?” Deslauriers said of deportation issues that affect many local Latino families, among others.

Angela Alvarado, the event’s keynote speaker, addressed the issue of social media abuses and responsibilities. A Santa Clara County deputy district attorney since 2000, she stressed the importance of parents’ and other adult leaders’ roles in becoming familiar with and regulating children’s social media uses. She likened commitment to social media safety to preparing students when they first learn how to drive a car.

“Digital safety, what we’re now calling ‘digital responsibility,’ is a life skill,” Alvarado told the mostly adult audience. “It’s a life skill we didn’t have to learn. (But) it’s become a life skill we have to teach. We have to teach it way before teaching the big one, which was driving.”

The Mountain View resident and Mountain View High School graduate asked, “What was it like when someone was teaching you how to drive?”

Adults sat in the car with their young students, she said. Students were told to put on their seatbelts, obey the roles of the road, watch for other drivers and limit the number of friends in the car.

“Does that sound like the same type of instructions we should be giving our young people before they get access to a digital device? It does to me,” Alvarado said.

She emphasized the importance of parents knowing the programs their kids are using.

“We’re jogging and they’re sprinting,” Alvarado said of the tech gap that can leave some parents out of the loop and unable to adequately protect their children. “We need to be their safety net, so when they do have an issue on the road of the internet, they know where to go, they know who to ask. We need to be able to understand the language they’re speaking.”

Just as a parent doesn’t hand over the keys of a Tesla to a 16-year-old, a smartphone isn’t just a flip phone, Alvarado reasoned – it’s a portal to young people’s communities.

“This is exciting, but you have a responsibility,” she said. “This is your community – you need to protect it like your neighborhood. You need to report things when you see they’re unkind. … We have to teach them how to navigate those waters.”

The most effective way of handling online abuses, Alvarado advised, is downright old-fashioned: face-to-face interaction. The misinterpretations that can occur from “likes” on Facebook, for instance, can be cleared up through straight talk.

“We’re at the same table, and we’re going to figure this out together,” she said.

For more information on CHAC, visit chacmv.org.