

Angels Among Us

Adelante Chicas

Helping Young Latinas Find a Place to Shine

By Bridget Cooke, Adelante Mujeres Executive Director

On any given week, over 200 energetic Latina girls participate in one of *Adelante Chicas'* rousing afterschool sessions. *Adelante Chicas* is one of four core programs of Adelante Mujeres, a nonprofit in Washington County focusing on the education and empowerment of low-income Latina women and their families. Through *Adelante Chicas*, the girls find friendship and celebrate who they are. They also find the strength to nurture their dreams.

One remarkable *Chica*, Rosa, joined the program three years ago. As she describes it, when she first got involved she was pretty much a loner who kept to herself. She had bouts of depression and rarely participated in school activities. Rosa, like so many immigrant children, comes from a family with many challenges. Her younger brother has a rare congenital disease requiring lots of care and attention. When he was born, Rosa's dad decided he wanted out. Soon her parents divorced.

With her mom dedicating much of her time to caring for Rosa's younger brother, Rosa assumed much responsibility at home. She also worried about her brother. In Latino families, relatives are expected to support each other and help maintain the household. Concern for the well being of the family is very high among Latino children and extends into their adult lives.

While familial duty and obligation is sometimes thought to be a burden on Latino children with negative academic and social impacts, studies have shown that young people gain self confidence, a sense of worth and critical life skills by assisting their families. In Rosa's case, discovering a community of girls in *Chicas* with comparable responsibilities helped break the isolation she experienced.

"I enjoy being part of *Chicas*," Rosa says, "because I am able to make new friends and feel supported. Even though everyone is different in their own way, I can always find something in common with the other girls."

Now Rosa never misses a *Chicas* session. She's come out of her shell and even takes on leadership roles within the group. She no longer feels embarrassed about her family, and her face is usually lit with a smile. As for her future, she's determined to go to college, in large part so she can continue to help her family.

Like Rosa, most youth just need the right support to turn a potential liability into an asset. *Adelante Chicas* provides that support to Latina girls in grades three through 12. This afterschool program consists of weekly sessions, led by a facilitator addressing topics like racism, inequality, social justice, oppression, bullying, sexism and cultural identity. Students have the opportunity to express their opinions and feelings through journaling, hands-on activities, group discussions and presentations. During the summer, the *Chicas* explore themes such as science and technology, health and wellness, and soccer through a variety of summer camps.

In an effort to strengthen parental participation, *Adelante Chicas* hosts family gatherings and parent workshops. At these workshops, parents learn



Summer soccer day camp is just one of the many *Adelante Chicas* programs offered by Adelante Mujeres.

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about topics like nutrition, community resources and conflict resolution. After one of these events, one parent said, "I like that the program helps improve my communication with [my daughter] and with other girls her age and culture."

Adelante's newest initiative is *Journey to College*. Latino youth have the highest high school dropout rate in Oregon. Just over half of entering Latino freshman graduate from high school. *Journey to College* promotes a pro-college culture. The girls are encouraged to begin thinking about college as an attainable goal and to strive for academic success. Individual Development Accounts are offered, allowing the girls to save for college by receiving a match of \$3 for every \$1 they save.

Adelante Chicas has partnered with several local universities and colleges that have hosted the girls and their parents for campus visits. The girls meet with Latina college students to discuss the unique challenges Latinas face. For many, these visits are their first times on a college campus. The girls' excitement is evident in their smiles, questions and enthusiasm as they realize college is within their reach.

This program is meeting a need in the community, evidenced by a growing demand as it expands to new schools. The impact of this program can be summed up by the words of a *Chicas* alumni:

"Thanks to *Adelante Chicas* I met the best people in the world. I met people that had gone through the same things I have. *Adelante Chicas* opened many doors for me. And thanks to the Individual Development Account savings program, I am able to go to college. I am able to shine."

For more information about Adelante Mujeres, visit adelantemujeres.org