The Glam Clan

Group of UC San Diego science students confronts social isolation of elderly glamorously

They are aspiring female scientists on a beautiful mission—literally. Armed with makeup brushes, mascara wands, emery boards and nail polish, these “missionaries” cast out the increasing loneliness experienced by the elderly with glitz and glam. Offering companionship and complimentary makeovers to local senior-home residents, they are the GlamourGals at UC San Diego.

Originally started in New York to build leadership in high school teens, the GlamourGals Foundation now applies its mission to colleges and universities. UC San Diego is one of three participating campuses in California, thanks to the efforts of Kristina Padilla, a fourth-year pharmacological
Kristina Padilla applies nail polish for one of the senior women.  
Photo courtesy of UC San Diego GlamourGals

chemistry undergraduate, who founded the chapter in May 2018 and serves as president.

Padilla explained that she wanted to establish something meaningful on campus and felt a connection with the GlamourGals organization.

“I thought of my grandmother, who has family around, but then I thought about seniors who are disconnected from their families and homes, and I felt a need to help,” she said.

**Chapter Make-up**

To begin the campus chapter, Padilla was required to recruit four members. So she invited a few friends to join, and her boyfriend signed up at first, too, to help get things started. The new chapter also was required to contribute an annual fee of $100 to the foundation. So Padilla set up a modest membership fee. In exchange for the chapter’s contribution, the foundation provides the makeup and materials needed to serve the elder population.

According to GlamourGals, social isolation is on the rise among the U.S. elder population and is considered a growing health epidemic. This year alone, for example, more than three million seniors will spend time in senior homes, with millions more expected to do so by 2030. Estimates show that nearly 60 percent of senior-home residents never receive visitors. Such isolation can adversely affect health.

Thus, the greater mission of GlamourGals is to offer seniors a restored sense of dignity through personal attention, caring touch and the opportunity to share their stories. For the UC San Diego GlamourGals, this compassionate approach extends to both women and men residing in senior homes.

**Foundation of Trust**

Edith Mendoza, also a fourth-year pharmacological chemistry undergraduate, learned of the program through the UC San Diego Pre-Dental Society, to which she and Padilla both belong.

“I was looking for something hands-on to do that was different from my coursework and my future work as a dentist,” said Mendoza.
She explained that one day she noticed an older man enter the room where the students were assisting other seniors. She also noticed that his fingernails were long, so she offered to file his nails for him—something she helped her father with at a time when he needed the help.

As a result, now other men also get their nails filed by the students during their monthly visits. Jessica Zavala, a third-year global health major, noted that many times their nails are not only long, but also chipped and sharp, presenting a hazard to their skin.

In working with the older women and men, Padilla and Mendoza said they realized that the service they provide to the seniors is indeed related to their future work as dentists.

“Dentistry is about patient trust—being able to establish that connection with someone on whom you’re going to work.” noted Padilla.

Zavala agreed that establishing trust is crucial to serving the seniors.

“When we meet them, it’s hard to talk at first because they are shy, but once we do start talking, they open up. It’s nice to see that transition from being shy to having fun,” she said.

**Applying Life Lessons**

The UC San Diego GlamourGals agreed that hearing the seniors’ stories is what they liked the best about the work they do.

Taylor McGrann, a fourth-year chemistry and biochemistry student, said that she appreciates the valuable lessons seniors share—like what works in a 72-year marriage.

“We gain a new perspective on life and are reminded of others’ struggles,” said McGrann. “We really make a difference in their lives.”

So much so, that the students said they often have to decline the seniors’ offers to pay them for the makeovers. They've been offered money (albeit fake money used at the senior home), valuable coins and handstitched dish towels made especially for the chapter.
Chapter president and founder Kristina Padilla diligently spruces up a lady’s fingernails. Photo courtesy of GlamourGals at UC San Diego

Padilla, who is graduating soon, said that the 19-member chapter’s officers are in place for next year and that she hopes to continue this work in dental school.

She noted that oral health care for the elderly, an underserved population in dentistry, is an important aspect of geriatric dentistry practice.

The GlamourGals at UC San Diego chapter is part of a nationwide, nonprofit organization. It includes more than 100 chapters and 1,700 members who bridge the gap between generations in their communities and pledge to help end elder isolation.

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