

GIVE

Big Wonders

A group of young volunteers steps up to help kids with disabilities.

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WALKING TALL
Beneficiary Diego Neumaier meets the volunteers.

It is 4 p.m. on a Sunday in Encino. A council has gathered for Small Wonders Foundation, a nonprofit that helps children with facial deformities get rehabilitative surgeries so they can live normal lives.

The meeting is called to order. The agenda is set, minutes read, votes cast. The meeting is adjourned. It's time to snack on Goldfish.

"We're working to raise money with simple things like lemonade stands, and right now we're planning for our fall fundraiser," says Kai Caster, who is 14. Kai is the old-



est member of the Small Wonders Junior Advisory Council. The youngest member is just 8.

The foundation works with pediatric plastic surgeon Dr. John Reinisch,

who is proving to be "a real miracle worker," the organization's founder says. Her daughter, Rocky, was born with a pre-cancerous birthmark.

Thanks to Small Wonders and the generosity of Dr. Reinisch, the 10-year-old has had five surgeries. Rocky is now on the Junior Advisory Council—which includes members from schools across Los Angeles.

Formed this past spring, the council includes 26 children, who for the most part work autonomously. It's not about going through the motions. "These kids really want to help and took this all on as their own—and with so much enthusiasm," founding board member Julie Riesz shares.

Senior Advisory Council chairs Chase Laski, Kai Caster and Brittany Sacks lead each meeting, taking input from committees such as special events and hospitality. Responsibilities aimed at helping others are taken seriously.

As Chase, 13, puts it, "I'm really lucky, and I think it's important to help people that are less lucky."

Kai chimes in, "It's one of the best feelings ever. You don't just help raise money; you know where it goes to, and you see the joy and how it really helps people."

At the June meeting, the council was fortunate enough to actually meet beneficiary Diego Neumaier, who lives in Mexico. Diego, who is an accomplished gymnast, was born deaf and without ears.

As a result of Small Wonders, Diego received corrective surgery that included artificial ears. This past spring those ears allowed him to hear his mother's voice for the first time.

And now it is Diego who is giving back. The teen recently became a member of the Junior Advisory Council. He says he now wants to help other kids overcome disabilities so they can feel like everyday kids too. ●



Diego and his mom.