

Meet the Girl Scout Gurus: Leaders of the Largest Girl-Led Business in the World

By SIERRA SHAFER
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Next week, Palisadians will be faced with a tough choice.

Thin Mints or Samoas.

One box or two. Or four.

Jan. 23 marks the official kickoff for the Girl Scout Cookie Program in Pacific Palisades and with it the chance for patrons of all cookie preferences to support one of the biggest entrepreneurial efforts in the world.

But it has become one of the most misunderstood aspects of Girl Scouting, according to **Lise Luttgens**, the chief executive officer of Girl Scouts of Greater Los Angeles.

Luttgens, who makes her home in the **Highlands**, said not only does the revenue from a \$4 box of Tagalongs help fund the activities, field trips and programs girls do throughout the year, it introduces girls as young as five years old to essential life skills.

"We are giving these girls an opportunity for so much more than cookies, camping and crafts. These girls learn how to help others and how to help themselves – and it lasts a lifetime," Luttgens said. "Through the Cookie Program, the girls learn money management, decision-making, people skills, goal setting and business ethics and when a girl participates, she is joining forces with the largest girl-led business in the world. When you say 'no' to a box of cookies, that's what you're saying no to."

When the Girl Scouts in Pacific Palisades come knocking, Luttgens said they must be able to articulate why they are raising money and how they plan to use it. In the Palisades, girls have used their money to better the **Village Green**, provide Thanksgiving dinner to the hungry and clean up areas around the Village. But the buck doesn't always stop in the 90272.

Palisadian Girl Scout guru and the Service Unit Manager for Westside Girl Scouts troops, **Lynn Mack-Costello**, has seen even her youngest troops use their cookie revenue to cross cultural borders.

"In recent years, we had a troop of second-grade girls use their cookie money to buy a water filtration system for a village in Africa," Mack-Costello said. "There's a worldwide connection formed among these girls. They're taking care of each other even though they have never met. Our Cookie Program is helping girls learn from and teach each other."

According to Mack-Costello, the Cookie Program is an extremely important component of Girl Scouts – and it's also where 70 percent of the annual revenue comes from.

"The biggest challenge we face is our reliance on cookie revenue to support our programs. We are working to create a culture of philanthropy because it is important these girls receive the support they need," Luttgens said. "The girls are worth it. We need to believe the girls are worth it because they are going to end up running businesses and leading Congress. They're going to lead the country."

Statistics show they already are.

Nearly 60 percent of female members of Congress have been Girl Scouts and all five current female state governors are Girl Scout alum-



Service Unit Manager, **Lynn Mack-Costello** and CEO of Girl Scouts of Greater Los Angeles work to provide young girls with leadership skills and opportunity through Girl Scouts. Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

nae. Girls who earn the Gold Award even enter the military one rank higher. The equivalent of the Boy Scout's Eagle Award, the Girl Scout Gold Award, is the highest and most prestigious award in Girl Scouting.

"From ages five until 12, it's about fun and friendship and the girls love it, but then we see a drop off after that," Luttgens said. "Maybe it's parents who want to make sure their girls are ready for college and want them involved in the right extra curricular activities. Little do they know, earning the Gold Award is the best preparation there is."

Gold Award recipients spend one to two years on their projects around the age of 17. In 101 years of Girl Scouting, one million girls have earned the Gold Award. University research indicates that adding the Gold Award to a college application is a critical element in the admissions decision process.

"This award is the culmination of countless hours of planning and dedication. It is something that these girls are extremely passionate about and that encompasses organizational leadership and networking skills," Mack-Costello said. "They are fulfilling a need in their community, whether here in the Palisades or globally, and what is really neat is the sustainability of these projects. They continue on long after the girl has earned her Gold Award."

Palisadian Gold Awardee, **Skye Montgomery**, organized a holiday luncheon and gift-giving event in Santa Monica in 2011, serving 250 homeless guests. Montgomery recruited and organized a staff of more than 40 volunteers and organizations to sponsor and underwrite the affair, "Give Thanks and Gobble."

Montgomery continues to run the annual event from college.

"The Gold Award is the best-kept secret in Girl Scouts," Luttgens said. "A girl who has earned the Gold Award has become a community leader. Her accomplishments reflect leadership and citizenship skills that set her apart – and the girls in our council receive their Gold Award at two times the national average."

Luttgens attributes that rate of success to the dedication of the girls – but especially the committed leaders, like Mack-Costello, who serve as role models and guides for the girls.

While her own daughters have long since earned their Gold Award and moved on from their home in **Upper Bienvendeda**, Mack-Costello

remains closely dedicated to the Girl Scouts, training future leaders and equipping them to head their own troops.

"I'm very passionate about Girl Scouts and I am truly blessed. I don't want this opportunity to pass by other girls. As an educator and a lawyer, I can do my part to ensure that our leaders are prepared to give the next generation of girls the same opportunities I had," Mack-Costello said. "Fun and friendship is great, but for the girls who stay on and have long-term goals, that demonstrates determination and consistency. Seeing my former troops grow up and become professionals is so rewarding."

Luttgens and Mack-Costello agree; they are life-long Girl Scouts and they're in it for the long haul.

"Girl Scouts provides these girls with support at a time when our society is finally open to seeing them make it. This really is our time," Luttgens said. "That's why I joined and that's why I stay. I see the effort every day from leaders like Lynn and from the girls and it keeps me focused on making a difference in a collective way. It's huge. This is a sisterhood and the way we are all tied together is incredible. Girl Scouts is a movement and we are moving forward."

Gift of Caring

The Gift of Caring program is a way for customers to support military women and men through Girl Scouts. Customers can purchase a box of cookies to be donated to the Armed Forces.

"Girl Scout cookies are an iconic slice of America. It's like being home. Maybe you aren't eating cookies, but now you can support the Girl Scouts and the troops overseas. There is no excuse to not buy a box of Girl Scout cookies anymore."

-Lise Luttgens, CEO of Girl Scouts of Greater Los Angeles

What can a cookie do?

How \$4/box supports Girl Scouts



Girls Scouts in Pacific Palisades look on as they learn proper care for the American Flag. Photo courtesy of Lynn Mack-Costello