



Golden Girls

by Megan Barnes

15 San Pedro Girl Scouts Earn Highest Honor

Girl Scout Gold Award Winners: (l to r back row): Caroline Skubik, Malia Wakinekona, Katie Holcomb, Nichole Cvitanovich, Elizabeth Rich, Gabriela Ferrigno; (l to r front row): Josie Morgan, MinhTam Nguyen, Belisaria Sidener-Mercado, Victoria Vitalich, Samantha Marino, Nicole Braman, Nicolette Barraza; Not pictured: Monica Bender, Corin Sowers (photo by John Mattera)

For many teenage girls, graduation and the senior prom are two of the most anticipated days of their high school years. And for more than a dozen girls from San Pedro, there was another big day to add to the list this spring: their Girl Scout Gold Award medal ceremony.

This year, a whopping 15 Girl Scouts from San Pedro earned the Gold Award — the highest achievement in Girl Scouting — about five times as many recipients as usual. Similar to the Boy Scouts' Eagle rank, the distinction is only awarded to five percent of all eligible Girl Scouts nationally.

Thirteen of San Pedro's golden girls come from Troop 6235, including Nicolette Barraza, Nicole Braman, Nichole Cvitanovich, Gabriela Ferrigno, Katie Holcomb, Samantha Marino, Josie Morgan, MinhTam Nguyen, Bellisaria Sidener-Mercado, Caroline Skubik, Corin Sowers, Victoria Vitalich, and Malia Wakinekona. They're joined by Monica Bender of Troop 7825 and Elizabeth Rich of Troop 5855.

The girls finally received the awards they spent so many years working toward in a ceremony on May 17. This fall, many of them will be heading to four-year universities.

"I'm so proud of them, it's a lot of work and a lot of dedication," says Alyssa Lebitsamer, co-leader of Troop 6235. "To see them undertake something like this is really awesome and I know how hard it is because I did it myself."

For Lebitsamer, girl scouting is more than an activity, but a family tradition that's given her lifelong friends. Her mother and troop co-leader Kris Brust, who sits on the Gold Award Committee of the Greater Los Angeles Girl Scout Council, gets teary-eyed talking about the astounding number of girls who made Gold this year.

"I am proud to bursting," Brust says. "This is statistically very significant."

Co-leader Cathy Skubik agrees. "I'm incredibly proud. I've watched them grow up and it doesn't surprise me, but it's still very inspiring and impressive."

Why there was such an unprecedented number of Golds this year, the girls say, is

because they motivated each other and had strong troop leaders. Most of them have been scouting since elementary school and some of them started as Daisies in kindergarten.

"Since elementary school our leaders have been telling us about the Gold Award and we've been looking forward to this for a long time," says Josie Morgan, a Rolling Hills Prep senior who will be going to UCLA this fall.

"We motivated each other and it felt really good to give back to my community," says Victoria Vitalich, a senior at Mary Star of the Sea High School who will be attending Loyal Marymount University. "Through Girl Scouting and earning my Gold Award I have learned numerous valuable life lessons such as taking responsibility for my actions, being an accountable individual, honesty, and the importance of both the individual and teamwork. My leaders especially have helped me to learn that in order to achieve a goal, one must embody unwavering commitment, dedication, perseverance, and hard work."

Although many of the girls went off to different high schools, scouting kept their tight-knit group together through the years.

Like with many activities, it isn't uncommon for some Girl Scouts to become less involved or quit when they reach their teen years and take on heavier class loads. This group of girls not only stuck it out all the way through high school, but they put in hundreds of hours of service to join the select few Girl Scouts who earn the highest honor.

In order just to qualify to go for Gold, they had to do leadership projects, meet badge requirements and put in 40 hours of service. Then each girl had to plan and execute a seven-step community service project — a process that takes at least two years from start to finish. Collectively, the girls put in about 1,400 hours working on their service projects.

Gabriela Ferrigno, a Rolling Hills Prep senior, put on a filmmaking camp at Toberman Neighborhood Center for children who created a documentary about bullying.

"I came up with this idea because I love acting and filmmaking and I thought that this would be a fun and effective way to teach about a huge problem in society today —



bullying,” Ferrigno says. She will be attending UC Berkeley this fall.

Bellisaria Sidener-Mercado, a senior at Port of Los Angeles High School who will be attending Cal Poly Pomona, put on self-esteem building activities for children at Rainbow Services.

“I made build-it-yourself snack kits, self-esteem building crafts and outdoor games for the children while their moms were at counseling sessions,” she says. “I also made a crock pot cookbook and collected crock pots for the families to have as they were leaving the shelter.”

Elizabeth Rich, a sophomore at Palos Verdes High School, renovated an old restaurant space for a group of Catholic Workers led by Helen Grove to use to serve meals to the homeless.

“I had heard that Helen was cooking in one space and then hauling food, tables and chairs to downtown San Pedro where she would serve dinner to about 80 people. Then she would have to pack everything up and get it back to its original place where she would also have to do her dishes, etc.,” she says. “I heard that she had been given an old restaurant space to use but it was a complete mess and I wanted to be able to make it happen for her as well as for all of the homeless people she would be serving.”

Other projects focused on teaching and promoting science, the arts, reading, sewing, cultural diversity, environmentalism and sports. Vitalich built a playground and garden at

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a pre-school, and Nichole Cvitanovich worked with the San Pedro Bay Historical Society to interview 30 immigrants from 25 countries.

In addition to the fulfillment of doing good for their communities, the girls said their projects gave them the opportunity to grow as leaders. Unlike with the Bronze and Silver awards, which are earned in elementary school and middle school, the troop leaders take a step back for the Gold Award and let the girls lead their projects on their own from start to finish.

“I really think that they come from strong parents and a high work ethic,” Brust says.

When asked what advice they have for younger Girl Scouts to go for Gold, the girls said earning the award was not only a great addition to their college applications, but personally rewarding beyond measure.

“It’s really hard, the amount of hours, or years really, that you put into it, but it is worth it and you should follow through,” Nicolette Barraza says. “And don’t wait to the last minute!” **spt**

To learn more about how you or your daughter can get involved in the San Pedro Girl Scouts, email SPGS@cox.net.