

LOCALLY OWNED BY PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP



Hoping for a spot on MTV

Latinas find support, friendship and possibly fame in weekly meetings

BY ROB CULLIVAN ✉

The Gresham Outlook, Dec 4, 2007 (2 Reader comments)



JOHN KLICKER / GRESHAM OUTLOOK

Mayra Gómez, right, a social studies teacher, serves as advisor to ALMAS. The hands in the top right photo reflect the group's name, which means "souls" in Spanish.

Sara Brennan, 17, a senior at Gresham High School, was a self-described "straight-Fs" student not too long ago.

However, this year she's doing a lot better, thanks in no small part to ALMAS, a girls' group consisting mostly of first-generation Mexican-Americans that meets every Tuesday after school. Sara adds that her involvement with ALMAS – which is Spanish for "Souls" – even has her thinking about college now.

"I know we support each other," she says.

Sara and the other girls tutor one another and volunteer for service projects that have benefited such groups as battered women, people with AIDS and female soldiers serving in Afghanistan.

The students also discuss various issues related to their lives, including dealing with peer pressure to dumb down their intellectual abilities, as well as the loneliness that sometimes

comes with being the children of two cultures – Latino and American – and not always fitting in with either.

“We’re not either Mexican, Latino or American,” says Yaneira Romero, 17, a senior. “We’re a mix.”

The group formed last year after Mayra Gómez, a social studies and English as a Second Language teacher, invited young Latinas to come together on a weekly basis and help one another achieve academic and other goals. The teacher says that Hispanic students need the encouragement because they are in the minority at Gresham and sometimes feel alone and undervalued.

“I wanted them to be themselves in any setting,” Gómez says.

Joanna Zavala, 15, a sophomore, says she found a welcome space in ALMAS.

“In most of my classes, I’m the only Latina,” she says. “For me, it’s kind of embarrassing to bring out my own culture in my class.”

Her sister, Rocio, 17, a junior, adds that being in the minority can be difficult, especially when her peers are discussing contentious issues like Mexican immigration to this country.

“We’d be in class, and everybody would be against it, and I would be the only one for it. And it was hard to be alone with everyone against it,” she says.

Although the group is primarily Latinas, it’s open to any girl at the school, Gómez says. ALMAS is designed to help the young women share their culture, their thoughts and their dreams in a setting where they don’t have to worry what boys think about what they say.

“If there were guys in here, we’d be pretty shy to get it started,” Rocio says.

The group is not shy about one thing – getting on MTV. The music channel’s bilingual Latino station, MTV TR3s, and Youth Venture, an Arlington, Va.,-based group, recognized ALMAS last month as one of 50 teams of students nationwide that have formed plans to help stem the high dropout rate among Latino high school students. The 50 teams each received a \$1,000 grant to fund their work, which ALMAS is using to pay for such items as transportation, speakers, service projects and snacks.

ALMAS was also one of just five teams to receive a \$5,000 scholarship, which will be divided between the group’s founding members: Crystal Galarza, Rocio Zavala, Yaneira Romero, Sara Brennan, Adriana Moylett and Lissett Garcia. Eventually, one of the five teams will be selected to be interviewed on MTV TR3s, according to Emma Carrasco, the station’s spokeswoman.

Carrasco spoke highly of ALMAS, which has formed a mentoring program between college students and the Gresham girls, and which has also hosted presentations by Latino professionals who’ve talked about their careers.

“Clearly it was the innovation of their thinking, the level of commitment of the youth involved, that were factors in they’re being selected,” Carrasco says of ALMAS.

Yet it seems that the real strength of the group lies not in its focus on academics or careers, but on the friendships it has fostered.

“I got, like, a whole new group of friends,” Joanna says.

Lissett Garcia, 17, a junior, who transferred to Gresham from Reynolds High School last year, echoes that notion.

“I’ve gotten to meet more people that I really like, and that I enjoy being with, and I got a lot of support that I didn’t get before being here,” she says.

Like Sara Brennan, Mari Uctrujeque, an 18-year-old senior, says she’s struggled in school, but has found new hope since joining ALMAS.

“I’m trying my best to focus on my classes and do better,” she says.

Crystal Galarza, 16, a junior, credits Gómez for inspiring the girls to dream big.

“I know to me that Miss Gómez is more than a teacher, she’s a friend,” Crystal says.

Gómez smiles at the compliment and says that grades are coming out this week. The girls break up in laughter. Soulful laughter.

Reprinted with permission