

OHS "La Sisterhood" Club Members Speak at Leadership Institute

Latina students in Ossining formed the club to empower one another to reach their potential and spread positivity throughout the community.

- **Cara Matthews, Community Contributor**
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Reply



Members of La Sisterhood Club pose in the bathroom they helped beautify. (Ossining School District)

Rising junior Katherin Vera was in multiple clubs at Ossining High School, but she did not feel like she had a voice because they were so large.

Friends told her about a new club called La Sisterhood. She joined in January and immediately felt comfortable. "Even if they didn't know me, everyone just started talking and acting like we were literally a family," Katherin said.

Panorama student culture and climate surveys in recent years found that female students of color were the population that felt least connected to Ossining schools. Latina students proposed starting an after-school group for girls, similar to My Brother's Keeper for boys of color.

"Their main mission is to be there for each other as Latina women, as immigrant women, as academics, and just to empower each other to reach their potential and

spread positivity throughout the community," said English as a New Language teacher Elizabeth Testa, the club's adviser.

Five club members, OHS Principal Stephen Hancock and Ms. Testa were invited to tell the story of La Sisterhood at Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES' seventh annual Regional Leadership Institute July 15. The virtual event featured leaders and teams that have made an impact on the lives of students and communities. Some leaders who attended said they would like a similar club in their districts.

"What makes me proud is the fact that this club is student-run," Principal Hancock said. "The girls set the agenda, activities and the speakers that they want. They are a model for what a true after-school club should be."

"This group of young ladies is bigger than just an after-school club," he added. "They have formed a family that supports one another and welcomes new students to our school and country."

Club members and OHS staff said it was an honor to present at the conference. "I think any opportunity for us to get them in front of adults so they can share their experiences is super important so they know that their voices matter," Ms. Testa said.

OHS students formed La Sisterhood in the 2018-19 school year. Their activities have included a Friendship Fiesta for new Ossining students from other countries, an overnight camping trip, and guest speakers to talk about important issues like healthy relationships.

Rising OHS senior Clio Sanchez, who moved to the United States from Ecuador two years ago, said the service club gives back to the community and allows girls with similar interests who speak the same language, to bond. Most meetings are in Spanish because students are more comfortable with that, but the clubs doors are open to any girl, she said.

After a custodian found some anti-Semitic and racist symbols and language in an OHS bathroom last fall, La Sisterhood brainstormed on how to respond. The group wanted something tangible and visible to spread love throughout the school, so members adopted a bathroom. They decorated it with posters and positive messages like "Disarm hate," "Choose love" and "Life is beautiful." They bought nice soaps and other supplies for it, and many people gave donations. That led to other school groups adopting their own bathrooms, and students decorating lockers and other areas at OHS.

"It was amazing knowing that even though we thought it was going to be a onetime thing, it spread around the school," said Katherin, whose family is from Ecuador.

She said if anything negative is going on in the community, La Sisterhood wants to know what it can do as a group to make everyone feel safer.

"I'm someone that really likes to be involved in my community and this club really helps me to do that," she said.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, La Sisterhood had plans to do read-alouds for the first- and second-grade girls at the Brookside School and start "Las Hermanitas," or "Little Sisters." Club members also want to reach out to girls at Anne M. Dorner Middle School.

"Something that I said during the presentation was that this club is for students, it's made by students, for students," Katherin said. "This club is ours and it's for our community and it's something that we want to leave for our community."