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Acalanes Senior Driven to Empower Women

By Lucy Amaral



Acalanes senior Jordan Myers, and author and child advocate Gina Otto. Photo L. Amaral

With the goal of encouraging women to let go of preconceived identities and negative self-image, Acalanes High School senior Jordan Myers created "Unfinished Business: Empowering Women and Girls," a seminar and workshop held May 24 at the Veterans Memorial Building in Lafayette.

"Everywhere females look, they are told they are 'too this' or 'too that' or 'not enough,' " said Myers. "I created this event in the hopes that they could drop those stories and become who they truly were meant to be."

Myers said she titled the event "Unfinished Business," based on a quote from U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in which Clinton says that 'the rights of women and girls is the unfinished business of the 21st century.' "This struck something inside of me," Myers said. "Women suffer on a daily basis from various things, and I believe when one woman is empowered, she can then go and empower ten more."

More than 100 people attended Myers' event, which was developed through her English 4 -WISE class. The WISE program (Wise Individualized Senior Experience) at Acalanes serves as an alternative to the traditional English 4

or AP English 4. It gives students the opportunity to explore areas of interest through independent projects or internships and emphasizes real world, outside-the-classroom experience. Myers worked for more than four months coordinating this event, guided by an in-school mentor, as well as with her mother, an event planner. It was through her mother that Myers met the event's keynote speaker, Gina Otto.

A best-selling author, producer and children's advocate, Otto read her book, *Cassandra's Angel*, a modern-day fairy tale about labels girls are given and take on as their identity, and the power of dropping those labels. Using the book as a backdrop, Otto illustrated the importance of empowering women and girls, the process of mentorship, and the need for self-expression, personal growth and self-esteem.

Otto focused on the labels that can be placed upon young girls, calling them "Stories" and how young women's insecurities can be based on these stories. She said the overriding reaction that comes after the meetings from women she speaks with is that they didn't even know they had a choice to drop the stories. "They say 'This is how we live, this is how we've been taught,'" said Otto. "(After the seminars) They will say: 'I didn't even know I had a choice to take back my own thoughts, own my own voice, shine my own light.'"

Otto recently launched the *Cassandra's Angel* Initiative to engage, educate and empower American girls, who in turn, will empower others.

"The message is either you are the story or you are the light. And every moment we get to choose: are we the story or are we the light?" said Otto. "And when we find that light, we light up the whole world."

Myers said she didn't know what result to expect from the event. "I thought maybe a few girls would be impacted," she said. "But the reality was that every woman and girl in the room was impacted. I could not have asked for better results."

Myers will attend UC Berkeley next year and plans to major in Media Studies. She hopes to continue her efforts to empower women through her studies and her major. "I find the media fascinating as it is a huge part of everyone's lives," she said. "Unfortunately, the media doesn't always have the most positive impact on girls so I hope with my work I can change that."

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