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Girls Inc. Builds Career Pipeline for OC Employers

Connects High School Girls with Boeing, ADP, Disneyland

By KIM STEMPER

SANTA ANA — Lara Elkatat still remembers walking into Boeing's offices in Seal Beach for the first time in 2019, unsure whether she belonged in a room filled with engineers, many twice her age. The 16-year-old was matched with Boeing through Girls Inc. of Orange County, which places girls in externship—short-term career exploration gigs—with local companies to give them a close-up look at careers that might otherwise seem out of reach.

Today, Elkatat works at Boeing full time as a stress analyst.

"The program definitely set me up for success," said Elkatat, who was hired by Boeing in 2024 after majoring in mechanical engineering in college.

Elkatat's path from externship participant to entry-level hire to seasoned professional is exactly the outcome Girls Inc. of Orange County envisioned when it created Girls Meet the Workforce. The career-development program works with local employers ranging from Boeing and ADP to Disneyland to expose high school girls to various industries, workplace expectations and potential career paths.

This summer, 115 girls participated in the program.

"Girls Meet the Workforce isn't a traditional internship. It's an experiential journey," Lucy Santana-Ornelas, CEO of the Santa Ana nonprofit, told the Business Journal.

Commitment from the Start

Girls Inc. of Orange County has long focused on preparing girls to be, in the organization's words, "strong, smart and bold."

Girls Meet the Workforce extends that mission into offices, labs and studios across the county. Launched more than 15 years ago, it helps participants identify and prepare for careers in a variety of sectors from aerospace to entertainment to finance.

Girls in the 9th and 10th grade are guided toward two-week placements that give them their first exposure to an office environment. Rising high school juniors and seniors are eligible for the program's four-week, on-the-job externship. Girls apply to up to three partner companies before being matched with one.

Prior to placement, girls complete 50 hours of training, with curriculum planned by Santa Ana College.

Participants build soft skills such as interpersonal communication, email etiquette and the importance of a firm handshake, along with technical skills such as navigating Microsoft Office and Google applications. Girls can also earn an AI certification.

Santana-Ornelas said the externships are built to be immersive, giving girls enough time to do real work and talk with real employees, without asking a company to commit to a semester-long internship. The program can be especially revealing for girls from under-resourced communities.

"Some girls may have only seen their families in low-level jobs," said Santana-Ornelas. "This program allows them to see that there are a wide range of careers that they can learn about and experience."

New Experiences

Once settled in her externship, each girl has her own mentor at the company, who provides guidance, support and encouragement. Brittany Ancona, director of strategy & op-



Lucy Santana-Ornelas, CEO, Girls Inc. of Orange County (center) with Girls Meet the Workforce participants



Girls Inc. mentor, Megan Stidham Nixon, project manager, ADP, (right) with Girl's Inc. participant Jocelyn Le

erations at Irvine-based Allergan Aesthetics, told the Business Journal that being a mentor is more than just giving career advice.

"I hope my mentee takes away a sense of confidence and possibility," said Ancona, who has mentored two students through the Girls Inc. program. "I want her to know that she belongs in any room, and she will continue to learn, contribute and grow throughout her entire career."

Lasting relationships are inevitable.

Elkatat says she keeps in contact with her mentor, Hannah Robinson, who inspired her daily.

"She is still a role model to me," she said.

Now, Elkatat mentors younger girls coming to Boeing through the program.

"It's an honor to help and guide them," she said. "I like to help them with small things too, like where to find the cafeteria."

Mentee Gabrielle "Gabby" Long said the influence mentors have on the students is greater than they might realize.

For her, the program has led her through a journey of two very different working environments.

Her first externship placed her with a youth-oriented organization, working along-

side youth program staff.

Her second externship, completed this summer, took her to Disneyland in Anaheim, where she shadowed two departments, sat in on meetings and joined theme park managers on duty walks. She also spent time in the Imagineering department, where she got a sneak peek of the new animatronics on Pirates of the Caribbean.

"I would encourage any girls who are on the fence to apply for this program," said Long, who aspires to be a pediatrician. "You'll learn skills that will help your future."

A Range of Industries

Allergan Aesthetics is one of dozens of companies that partner with Girls Meet the Workforce. Fifty percent of the externships are in STEM fields.

Allergan, a partner since 2019, says the program is a natural extension of the company's commitment to science, education and innovation.

"Medical aesthetics sits at the intersection of healthcare, science, technology, medical education and patient care and we believe it is important for young people, especially



Lara Elkatat, stress analyst, Boeing

young women, to understand the diverse career paths that exist within this industry," company spokesperson Adelle Infante said.

"A career in STEM does not have to look one specific way," added Ancona. "In medical aesthetics, for example, there are opportunities that span science, innovation, education, training, research, patient care and ultimately landed me in commercial operations. I wish I had known earlier just how many doors a STEM background could open."

Companies that host girls say the arrangement benefits them as much as the students.

Megan Stidham Nixon, project manager for ADP in La Palma, is another program mentor.

"This is one of the best platforms," said Stidham Nixon. "It is the most well-rounded and organized that I've seen. We've had wonderful experiences with Girls Inc. I wish I'd known of something like this when I was that age."

While some girls in the program end up pursuing different careers, Elkatat said working at Boeing gave her a glimpse at her future once she landed on the analytics team.

"After I was hired, I rotated to this team. It's my dream job. I never would have discovered it if it weren't for Girls Inc." ■