

# EWLC and PACE: Extraordinary women helping extraordinary girls as a catalyst for future change

BY JEFF ZBAR

**K**atherine has led a tough childhood. She's endured the struggles common to many at-risk and vulnerable teens along a path that could have led her to drop out of high school or suffer a future of uncertainty.



Katherine Mena

Then, three years ago, when she was 13, she joined the PACE Center for Girls Broward. Today, she's president of the House Council – like a student council

for PACE's 85 girls. She works in a local doctor's office to explore a career in medicine, and has been awarded a PACE scholarship she'll eventually use to enroll in nursing school.

For Katherine, PACE, and its collaboration with Extraordinary Women Leading Change, has been a beacon of hope and a literal life-changer.

"The women are inspiring to me," says Katherine, whom GCI gifted with tickets to both previous EWLC conferences and saw examples of women executives – even CEOs – who came from difficult upbringings similar to her own. "They've had struggles like everyone, and have had to overcome situations. It's nice to be able to relate to them."

For 23 years, the PACE Center has helped young women ages 11 to 18 face risk factors such as poverty, sexual abuse or trouble in school or at home. Today, it offers life skills coaching, education and academic counseling, and helps create the support services to counter the potentially serious issues with positive and uplifting messages and intervention.

There is a natural synergy between PACE and EWLC. Both organizations support positive change and the building of future



Mary Zalaznik

leaders, especially at critical times in their lives or careers, says Mary Zalaznik, senior VP of operations with VITAS, a national health care provider based in Miami. She's also chairwoman of the EWLC Young Women Mentorship for Leading Change Committee.

"Our goal has been to build a bridge between young women who are making crucial decisions in the direction of their lives and future and the women that are successful in our community," says Zalaznik, who was recently named an Influential Business Woman by the South Florida Business Journal. "We strive to be leaders mentoring young women to change their destiny for the better."

Just as Zalaznik has had mentors at VITAS who have changed her life, she sees EWLC participants as mentors and examples to PACE's impressionable young women. After one mentoring session, Zalaznik realized the girls of PACE can be wise beyond their years and eager to build their self-confidence.

"I was blown away by the insight and

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maturity of the questions," she says. "There are a lot of parallels between the leadership team at VITAS and these young women."

Now in their third year working together, PACE and EWLC collaborate to encourage self-sufficiency, independence and leadership development. With the EWLC team's help, and that of committed community members, these girls, who have endured so much in their lives, leave the conference more empowered than when they arrived. They also come away with the realization that a childhood spent struggling may be no excuse.



Aggie Pappas

"It's critical to help empower girls to become the leaders of tomorrow," says Aggie Pappas, founding executive director of PACE Center's Broward branch. "With what they've experienced, we can help them

launch to a different plateau and take hold of their lives and become leaders. That's very much in line with Giselle [Cheminand]'s philosophy. She and her extraordinary women are willing to give

a hand to their younger sisters. You don't even have to explain it too much. They get it when they meet the girls. They want to help any way they can."



Sandie Foland

"It is important that as women, we share our challenges and opportunities to help the next generation level the playing field with men" said Sandie Foland, CEO of Baron Sign Manufacturing.

"Having been raised by a single mother and knowing where I am today, I realize the impact that the Young Women Mentorship Program with the PACE Center for Girls can have and how much having a mentor can contribute."

Katherine has experienced first-hand the help the women of EWLC can lend. Today, she's more self-confident and realizes "there's no limit to anything you can do."

"That's something that really spoke to me," she says. "The sky's the limit. You can do anything you put your mind to. It's always possible." ●