

GOOD TURNS; A Message of Abstinence; Carla Osorio, 16, is a mentor to young girls. Her aim is to lower pregnancy rates among Latinas.

The Los Angeles Times; Los Angeles, Calif.; Jul 21, 2002; JOSE CARDENAS;

[Carla Osorio], a 3.8-GPA student who likes hanging out at the mall with her friends, is well-versed on the rates of teen pregnancy. In California, teen pregnancy among Latinas remains high, at 90.5 births per 1,000 girls ages 15 to 19, compared with 59.9 for black teenagers and 20.7 for whites.

For Osorio, abstinence--the only 100%-effective way to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, she said--is the right choice. She traces her commitment to preventing teen pregnancy to her first contact with Girls Inc. when she was 11.

Osorio and her mother also went through a Girls Inc. program called "Growing Together" for 9- to 11-year-old girls. The program consists of a set of classes in which a girl and her mother, father, or another adult, bond as they learn about the human anatomy. "We had to write the male and female organs and then test ourselves," Osorio said. "You were learning 'vagina,' 'penis' and you were not embarrassed to say the specific name of the organ."

In Carla Osorio's volunteer work to prevent teen pregnancy, the high schooler's message is captured in a cheer she and a few other like-minded girls from Montebello composed:

Give me a T

Give me an E

Give me an E

Give me an N

Give me an S

What do we want from teens?

ABSTINENCE

Make your decision

Make it a vision

And let it be your mission.

Osorio, 16, carries this message to other girls in Los Angeles partly through her position as one of the spokeswomen for the Los Angeles chapter of Girls Inc., a national nonprofit organization that mentors girls. Whether speaking locally at Girls Inc. conferences, appearing in a television documentary or working with other teens in the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, Osorio's message of abstinence makes sense to her.

"I guess it's kind of like in my values already, to be abstinent right now," said Osorio, a junior at Montebello High School, "because my priority is my education."

Osorio, a 3.8-GPA student who likes hanging out at the mall with her friends, is well-versed on the rates of teen pregnancy. In California, teen pregnancy among Latinas remains high, at 90.5 births per 1,000 girls ages 15 to 19, compared with 59.9 for black teenagers and 20.7 for whites.

For her, it's especially satisfying to work to prevent teen pregnancy in communities like hers.

In her Montebello neighborhood, "we see girls getting pregnant every day and every year," she said. "Me, being a Latina, I should get this information to other Latinas."

Her choice of abstinence also is inspired by lessons from her family life: Her mother, an aspiring actress in Guatemala, became a teenage mother.

"Although she had the support of my dad, she couldn't do the things that were important to her," Osorio said. "She was going to have the opportunity to go to France because of her acting and instead she couldn't because she had me."

Girls Inc. is a well-established nonprofit based in New York-- www.girlsinc.org--that for decades has aimed to make girls "strong, smart and bold" with its mentoring programs nationwide.

The Los Angeles chapter, with offices in Pasadena, has five other spokeswomen devoted to other topics, such as economic literacy and philanthropy. But it's all geared toward preventing teen pregnancy, said Tatyanna M. Wilkinson, program coordinator for Girls Inc.

"Whether dealing with your economics or your day-to-day relationships with males and females or your parents, that is all pregnancy prevention," Wilkinson said. "Because the girls who get pregnant, if you sit down and you talk to them, they didn't have the opportunities that Carla had."

Girls Inc. does not consider abstinence its sole solution for preventing teen pregnancy. The organization advocates many other solutions, including use of condoms and other forms of birth control.

"There are other girls we work with who have been through our pregnancy prevention programming who are not pregnant, but who are sexually active, and they protect themselves," said Wilkinson.

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Her mother, Patricia--still an amateur actress who puts on community plays about HIV/AIDS and domestic violence--introduced Osorio to Girls Inc.

Patricia was a promoter--a community worker who teaches classes sponsored by Planned Parenthood and Girls Inc. about health and pregnancy prevention to women and girls in Southeast, East and Northeast Los Angeles.

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organ."

Another course that Osorio went through is called "Will Power/ Won't Power," for 12- to 14-year-old girls. The program exhorts girls to be assertive about what they want and don't want, what they will do and what they won't.

Osorio's enthusiasm about preventing teen pregnancy cemented itself when she was 13. On a panel of girls at a Girls Inc. conference, she spoke adamantly about her mission.

"I was struck by the fact that she was just turning 14, and already decided that she wanted to lower the rates of teen pregnancy," Wilkinson said. "In fact, she said that that day, she and two of her friends, 'We are going to lower the rates of teen pregnancy.' "

Her efforts led her to become a Girls Inc. spokeswoman on this issue.

But she has branched out.

Because of an essay she wrote, she was chosen to be part of a youth leadership group of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a nonprofit organization based in Washington D.C.

Participating youths from around the country were responsible for, among other things, passing out posters and speaking about the issue at their own high schools.

Osorio was taped in her daily life as part of "Breaking the Silence--Sex is not a Four Letter Word," by documentarian Michael King that may run on television by early 2003.

Osorio's focus on abstinence is not complicated. She's focused on going to college and becoming a psychologist.

And she can see in the teen mothers who attend a special section of Montebello High that her plans could be compromised if she had sex.

"Teens are not ready to be parents," she said. "We are not emotionally, mentally and physically ready to have sex."