

Bernadette's House helps girls blossom and soar

By JESSIE NEWBURN

Amina Ali was a single mother of three young children, a full-time employee and a part-time entrepreneur when she first heard of Bernadette's House in 2014.

An afterschool program providing a safe and supportive home-like environment for preteen and teenage girls? A one-to-one mentor match? Tutoring support, enrichment field trips and a whole lot of fun activities and celebrations? And all of this, right here in Laurel?

She thought she'd hit the jackpot.

Having been raised not by her mother but by a village, Ali knew the value of having supplemental support where she might fall short in raising her children. Excited, she enrolled her older daughter, who was age-eligible, in the program. Ali looked forward to the enrichment her daughter would gain as well as the little extra time she'd have,



Girls present their vision boards during Bernadette's House Brains & Beauty Aeronautics Summer Day Program.

COURTESY OF BERNADETTE'S HOUSE

herself, for her side business and own interests. She was also eager to enroll her younger daughter once she was old enough.

Right away, Ali's daughter started making new friends and connected with a mentor, with whom the now 23 year old stays in touch with to this day. She went on adventures, including an overnight trip to Solomon's Island, and field trips to plays and museums in the area. She had

experiences she'd never have had otherwise, including attending a cotillion and being a debutante.

What Ali hadn't anticipated was how taken by and drawn into the nonprofit's programs she, herself, would become. "I went from thinking I was going to have extra time for myself and my side business to becoming a house mom in the program ... then a board member and then director of external affairs," she said.

Andrea "Andie" Cohen was also introduced to Bernadette's House through her daughter's affiliation with the organization. Cohen, who's been drawn to leadership and service opportunities throughout her life, served as her daughters' Girl Scout troop leader. Her older daughter decided to create a dance program for the girls at Bernadette's House as her Gold Award project and connected with Carol Nash, the non-

profit's founder.

"Carol mentors not only the young girls, but also the parents and volunteers. She's passionate, persuasive and impactful," said Cohen, who has been a board member since 2017 and is currently its president. "It's easy to see how she attracts so many caring and capable adults into supporting the mission."

When Nash, who is now 79, was working as a nurse in New York City, she'd often see young women trying to get their nursing careers — and lives — off the ground. Yet time and again, she saw them abandoning their goals due to drug addiction, an abusive relationship or pregnancy. She well understood that these young women had dreams they hoped to fulfill, but often lacked the support they needed to succeed.

When Nash retired and moved with her husband to Maryland, she turned her concern into action and launched Bernadette's

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House in October 2012, with the goal of mentoring girls from 8 to 17 years old.

"She chose that age range to pick up the slack where many pre-K and early elementary school programs cut off," Cohen said. "Parents often can't afford after school care, and a lot of those programs aren't particularly supportive of girls, per se, whereas Bernadette's House is designed to support girls just being girls without other social pressures."

Originally located in an historic home within walking distance of Laurel Elementary School, Bernadette's House provided a safe and supervised after-school program where girls could be tutored and get help with homework while they built relationships with other girls.

When COVID-19 restrictions went into effect, the organization's in-person program shuttered, but the organization pivoted to offer Girls Rising, a free virtual program hosting monthly workshops. Over time, Girls Rising has evolved into a hybrid program aimed at teaching social and life skills through both virtual and in-person offerings. Each girl in the program is part-

nered with a volunteer mentor who connects weekly to provide academic, physical, mental and emotional support.

"What this organization provides with the barest-of-bones budgets and smallest of staffs is near-Herculean," Cohen said.

Brains & Beauty, a two-week summer camp run by the organization, is a winning example of so much coming from so little.

This year's camp theme was aeronautics. Camp staff partnered with a number of organizations, including the local nonprofit Sci-Tech2U (scitech2u.org), to create activities for the girls. Campers were able to experience a flight simulator, and some even went up in a Cessna. The girls learned to fly drones (and were each gifted with one to take home). The camp also partnered with Laurel Mill Playhouse for a drama program where the girls worked on costuming, makeup and set design, culminating in a play they presented to family and friends.

Outside of camp, another partnership with PNC Bank helped the girls learn about smart money, investing and the importance of managing their finances over time.

"We are open to supporting people who want to help the girls," Cohen said. Mohan Gu-

jral, who is also a board member, wanted to offer a STEM-focused robotics program. He now leads a free, 16-week program about robotics, including the basics of block coding and electronics.

Though small in staff and tiny in budget, Bernadette's House is well run. In addition to providing full financial transparency, the organization works to ensure measurable outcomes and as part of this effort applies metrics to track volunteers' hours.

"We recruit for mentors to pair up with the girls twice a year, and we're always looking for new board members, and particularly for people who seek leadership opportunities," Cohen said.

Cohen, who writes grants in her full-time job, said that while the organization is proactive in applying for grants, funding doesn't always come through. The organization is always grateful to local businesses that make regular donations, and Cohen noted that having a volunteer to help with fundraising would be a boon.

For more information about Bernadette's House, including programs, volunteering, mentoring, leadership opportunities and donating to the organization, go to bernadetteshouse.org.