



ANGEL LIGHT ACADEMY (ALA) HELD 21ST ANNUAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

BY CRYSTAL HARRELL

EVENTS

Patience, kindness, communication, and problem solving are some of the core tenants promoted at the Angel Light Academy (ALA)—a nonprofit organization teaching leadership to youth and adults within the Coachella Valley. The 21st annual ALA Youth Leadership Conference was held on March 9 and 10 at Martin Van Buren Elementary School, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Thirty-three schools were represented at the conference, including all three desert districts of Coachella, Desert Sands, and Palm Springs.

Held to commemorate the start of its 21st year since the first Youth Leadership Conference in 1998, the two-day event focused on teaching children ages 5-18 critical thinking skills, boundary setting, conflict resolution, and leadership. Topics relevant to Coachella Valley youth were discussed and demonstrated through skits performed by fellow youth leaders. Issues such as bullying, gang resistance, and suicide were put into perspective for younger attendees, while teenage participants benefitted from college/trade school preparation and job readiness.

Julia Wilmot and her husband General Richard Wilmot founded ALA initially to assist those with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, serving 600,000 children through the abuse prevention program, Project Prevention. The first Youth Leadership Conference was held in 1998 in Arizona and was moved to the Coachella Valley in 1999, with the first conference serving only 30 children. The organization has grown significantly ever since, now serving more than 200 children each year.

"If you carry that love for yourself within, you're not going to have any problems. You have a whole ton of friends here that will support you. Remember to always do things with kindness," Julia Wilmot advised the young attendees at the leadership conference.

One of the most important components that ALA promotes is giving through service. Especially implemented in all the Leadership

Training Programs, service projects are designed to help participants reflect on their leadership skills and how they can be improved through interaction with others and their communities. They learn to identify and become "Angels on Earth"—a term Julia Wilmot attributes to those who take time to help other people.

"My favorite part of ALA is seeing the transformation of the kids. At first they're confused and don't know what to expect. And then they start to see friendly faces and they begin to open up if they're really shy. I like teaching them and working with them. By the end of it, they're really happy," said Junior Leader, Gabriel Bailey, who is the grandson of Julia Wilmot.

ALA's Junior Leadership Training Program is a year-round program that gives in-depth training in leadership skills. Junior Leaders meet every six weeks with well-trained volunteer facilitators to learn leadership skills and apply them while doing service in the community. As they engage in ongoing learning, Junior Leaders complete Leadership Pins when showing excellence in leadership, character, and problem solving. There are different kinds of pins that represent the core values of ALA.

The Character & Leadership Pin is earned when Junior Leaders learn to apply character and leadership traits at home, at school, and in the community by using an effective problem solving model to create hope for the future. The Sports/Extracurricular Pin demonstrates leadership, sportsmanship, and good communication while developing physical fitness and healthy habits. The Education/Academics Pin is earned by showing excellence in school by maintaining good grades, graduating high school on time, and showing character in class. This is especially important, as Junior Leaders are required to maintain a minimum 3.0 GPA and must seek the help of tutors if their grades drop below this mark. Academic Excellence is promoted



with a Leadership Pin, honoring those who maintain straight A's or a 4.0+ GPA.

The Arts Pin lets Junior Leaders enhance their creativity in the outlet of their choice, such as dramatic arts, photography, film, or music. The Health and Wellness Pin helps youth develop healthy habits and positive behavior while setting goals, and understanding the consequences of unhealthy choices. Lastly, the Career Development Pin encourages Junior Leaders to take a look at various career options as they develop action plans to move into their desired career paths.

Jazmine Sanchez, an 8th grade student from John Glenn Middle School, enjoys being an ALA Junior Leader, having participated in the program for three years. "I love seeing the kids' faces light up when we do new activities. Just seeing them enjoying their time here and having so much fun makes me glad that they want to come back," explained Sanchez. "ALA has also helped me. I used to have trouble with public speaking, but now I can do presentations and speak freely with others because of my improved communication skills."

Madison Oeth, a 5th grader at Cielo Vista Charter School, has been in the program since she was six years-old, and the topics discussed in ALA hit close to home. "Being in ALA has helped me realize that my dad's addiction to drugs is not my fault. It's his problem, not mine. I learned to not blame myself. I like to help kids in similar situations," revealed Oeth.

Charity Cherrison has been a volunteer for the organization for twelve years, and fully

supports ALA's mission. "When I first found ALA and the values that it teaches children, my very first thought was 'If I had this when I was a child, my life would have been totally different. I would not have made all the bad decisions I did and I would've realized that it's okay to ask for help,'" stated Cherrison. "Every child realizes that someone is always there for them and they never have to feel alone again."

ALA programs are supported by donations, grants, and fundraising events, with 85 percent of the proceeds going directly into programming, and 15 percent to program development. Participants of the conference are asked to donate one hundred dollars to cover a portion of the cost for the facilities, materials, food, and curriculum; however, scholarships are available for those who cannot donate the full amount.

The first meeting of ALA Junior Leaders will take place on May 5. For more information, visit the organization's website at www.angellightacademy.org or call 888-311-7388.

