

# Friends & Neighbors



KARA ANDRADE/STAFF

**GIRLS' INC. BLUEPRINT GROUP**, Ileana Matzorkis, 16, Natasha Walls, 17, Sara Heaps, 17, Jasmine Walls, 14, and Nicole Oliver, 17, answers questions during a discussion on teen depression at Girls' Inc. of the Island City.

## Skits shed spotlight on teen depression

By Kara Andrade  
STAFF WRITER

There's a certain fearlessness to Holy Names student **Ileana Matzorkis**, 16, as she huddles in the corner of the Girls' Inc. meeting room, face buried in her arms, body folded tightly inward, wanting desperately to become invisible.

Matzorkis is playing the role of a depressed and suicidal teenager during a group presentation by the Blueprint Group. The group performed at the Girls Inc. of the Island City's Women of the 21st Century Club event themed "Mental Health and Teen Depression" held on Sept. 19. The audience was riveted and the skit continued.

"My daughter is not depressed! She's a teenager and this is just a phase!" yelled **Jasmine Walls**, 14, acting as "dad" to Matzorkis' depressed teen-ager character. The "mom," played by **Nicole Oliver**, 17, yelled back that they need to listen to their daughter, who no longer eats dinner with them, never leaves her room and has a bad attitude.

Their yells echoed across the room and Matzorkis' character crawled into herself even more. A voice-over by **Natasha Walls**, 17, began.

"They always fight when they drink, and they never want to talk about what's going on in my life. I feel so alone and left out."

The girl then takes the blade she's been holding the entire time and cuts her wrist.

There is applause and a mom sitting in the front row of the audience pulls her daughter near. In addressing the crowd, the seven members of the Blueprint group were knowledgeable and confident while answering people's questions.

"The purpose of our skit is to create awareness of how serious depression is," Matzorkis said. "It's important for people to get help and for parents to understand that if a kid is showing signs of depression that it's not a 'phase.'"

The group also thought it was

important to address depression and suicide in the same skit because the two go hand in hand. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people ages 15 to 24, studies show, and as many as one in eight adolescents suffer from depression. Depression often leads to suicide if left untreated or undiagnosed.

**Nancy Salamy**, executive director of Crisis Support Services Alameda County, said that every two hours a person under 25 commits suicide in the United States.

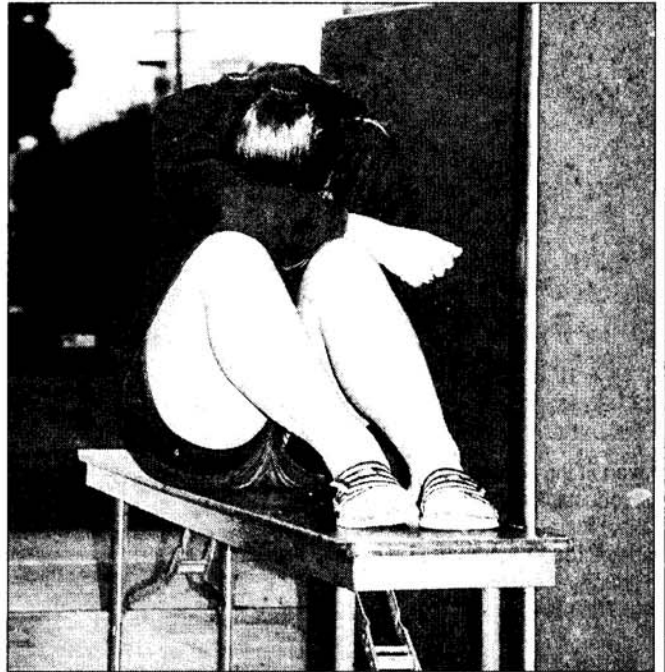
"Depression is the mental state this is the underlying cause for most suicides," Salamy said. "In every high school class that I speak I ask how many people have known someone who committed suicide and 40 percent of hands go up. When I ask how many considered suicide for themselves, a third of the hands go up."

For clinical psychologist **Michael Torres**, who collaborated with the Blueprint group to educate people on signs of depression and ways to cope with it, the teen years offer a lot of triggers for depression.

"Adolescence is a very tumultuous time," said Torres, who runs his own practice in Alameda and who works with teens at Kaiser Permanente in Oakland. "Young people are dealing with a general melancholy of leaving their childhood behind and feeling the real pressures of adulthood, college, jobs and being on their own."

Torres echoed Salamy's talk in pointing out that there are three main signs of depression: irritability, isolation and negative statements about self, future or environment. Often there is extreme fatigue that prevents a person from functioning day to day.

Torres is quick to add that teenagers, like adults, can show these signs when they've had a bad day, but if parents, friends or guardians notice a depressed mood and some of these symptoms are present for more than a two-week period, it's important to get help.



KARA ANDRADE/STAFF

**ILEANA MATZORKIS**, 16, of Holy Names High School acts in a skit about teen depression.



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**NANCY SALAMY**, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR of Crisis Support Services Alameda County, speaks about teen depression during a discussion at Girls' Inc. of the Island City.

Other triggers for depression include significant life stresses such as death, family divorces, trauma, or experiences of failure in school, romance or social life.

**Angela Hu**, 17, of Alameda High School said cultural expectations to succeed also affect teenagers.

"I have known a lot of Chinese girls get depressed because of bad grades. Their parents push them to succeed, and it adds a lot of pressure."

Culture does play a large role in people getting help for their children, Torres said.

"There's stigma and emotional vulnerability associated with depressive conditions," Torres said. "In Latino cultures, for example, there's less emphasis on mental health, so parents don't seek treatment. For Caucasians, social status may affect getting treatment."

For Matzorkis, it's important for parents to learn to talk to their children.

"You have to let your kids know that you're there for them," Matzorkis said. "Don't force them to talk to you or assume something's wrong and confront them like that."

The girls said it's important to

model a creative outlet for coping with depression.

"Sometimes it's hard for kids to talk about depression and what it's like for them," Matzorkis said. "It's easier to show it and to have a place where you can creatively express it through doing skits or spoken word or something creative."

When asked if they hoped to prevent depression with their presentation, Oliver quickly responded.

"We're not performing to prevent depression, we're performing to create awareness and for expression."

The group will present all three of their skits during the "Girls Take Charge" teen summit on Oct. 29 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Girls Inc. Meyers Center, 1724 Santa Clara Ave. The summit will feature speakers, performers, workshops and a girl-led panel discussion on depression and other topics. For more information, go to [www.girlsinc-alameda.org](http://www.girlsinc-alameda.org) or to [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov).

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