

Wallenberg Graduate Transformed by Wellness Wants to Make a Difference in Teens' Lives

Mika Sasaki has always been the kind of person people notice.

Luckily, Heather Graham, the Community Health Outreach Worker (CHOW) at Wallenberg High School from 2007 until 2010, was one of them.

"We were launching the Wellness Center and I was recruiting students for the Youth Outreach Worker (YOW) program," Heather recalls. "I was outside in the courtyard with one of the teachers, and Mika was walking past on her way to class.

"The teacher looked at Mika, then turned to me and said, 'If I saw that girl walking down the sidewalk, I'd cross and go to the other side of the street,' he told me. 'Her attitude is rotten, she's mouthy and she's really hard to deal with,'" he explained.

"That really sparked my interest," she says. "I was focused on recruiting kids who needed help. As it turned out, Mika had a 0.2 GPA. She had never been given a second chance. People had already decided that she was a bad seed and they wrote her off."

Mika definitely needed help. She was drinking. She was truant. She was angry. "When I started at Wallenberg I didn't know anybody. I had a really hard time my freshman year. I struggled with some of the girls bullying me, and my mother was in and out of the picture. When she was in the picture, it was always chaotic. During my sophomore year, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder; a year later, she was diagnosed with schizophrenia."

Mika was one of the first people who applied for the YOW program, Heather says. "She was extremely articulate. She could describe why Wellness mattered, and what she wanted to do as a YOW if she was selected. I was surprised and impressed."

As it turned out, Mika desperately needed to be noticed. "With my Mom being sick, I didn't have a lot of stability. She would get '5150'ed,' which means she was in the psychiatric hospital for anywhere from three days to two weeks at a time," she says. "But from the moment I met Heather, she instilled this confidence in me. She believed in me and that was really important to me as a young woman, having another woman stand behind me and say 'I believe in you,' and 'We're going to do this,' and 'I'm going to help you.'"

Mika served as a YOW from the time she was a sophomore until she graduated in 2010. "The first year, there were about six YOWs and we met every Wednesday after school. It was all new—it was the first

time the school had a Wellness Center, we were the first group of YOWs, and we were brainstorming and creating presentations from scratch. We blueprinted the YOW program there,” she says.

She established a reputation as an excellent public speaker and delivered class presentations about tobacco, bullying, sexual health, drinking, violence and LGBTQ issues. “From the minute I hired her, I never regretted it,” Heather says. “She was reliable, she was determined and she was dependable. Because other students also thought she was a force to be reckoned with, she had a lot to prove. She wanted to change her reputation with both students and staff. She wanted others to see her leadership potential besides the harsh exterior she was putting out to the rest of the world. Other adults and students were intimidated by her. But she could present herself in such a way that she would win people over.”

The other girls noticed the change. “The bullying stopped when I became a YOW. The girls saw that I had people standing behind me, supporting me and that I had leadership qualities. I wasn’t going to be pushed around or teased or neglected,” Mika says.

“Being a YOW gave me stability. I had a schedule, I was expected to be somewhere at a certain time. It gave me somewhere to go. I was still struggling with attendance at that time. There were days when I just didn’t want to go to school. There were other days when I didn’t know where my Mom was, or days when my Mom was off her meds and I’d need to take care of her.”

Again, Heather noticed. “When I wouldn’t go to school Heather would check in with me,” Mika recalls. “She’d say ‘I care about you. I noticed you were missing yesterday. What’s going on?’ To have someone on campus who actually cared about me, who cared where I was and who cared about my family business was so important. If it wasn’t for Heather and if it wasn’t for the Wellness Center, I never would have graduated from high school. I probably would have dropped out.”

As Mika’s reputation and credibility as an essential member of the Wellness team grew, more students began to notice. “One of the best parts about being a YOW was that younger kids would reach out to me when they had problems. But for a while I was self-medicating in order to deal with my Mom not being there. Once I became a role model to the other students, I had to address my own problems like drinking and attendance. Heather was really strict with me and let me know if my GPA and attendance didn’t improve, I couldn’t be a YOW.”

Heather acknowledged the importance of looking beneath the surface when working with teenagers. “Kids’ behavior is telling us something if we care enough to pay attention and take time to find out what it is. With Mika, it was the first time I was aware of how vitally important it is to have someone who can see your potential despite your behavior,” Heather says.

When her classmates were taking their college SAT tests, Mika held back. “I didn’t think a four-year college was suitable for me. No one in my family had ever gone to college before, and I didn’t know

how I'd pay for it. But Heather wrote me a letter of recommendation and I got a \$5,000 scholarship to City College for my LGBTQ work.

"If it wasn't for the scholarship I wouldn't have been able to keep going," Mika says. "I wanted to make Heather proud. I wanted to make my Mom proud. I wanted to make Wellness proud. I really wanted to graduate from college. I wanted to show people who didn't believe in me that I could do this despite my living situation."

Just as Mika credits Heather for her transformation, Heather was inspired by Mika. "I went on to get my master's degree in social work after working with Mika. She was as much a part of my growth as a CHOW, as a human being, and as a social worker as I was in her life as a YOW, as a human being, and as a student. We were parallels in each other's lives, in our belief in one another, and ultimately, our belief in ourselves."

Today, four years after graduating from Wallenberg High School, there's no trace of the harsh exterior people once noticed in Mika. She earned an associate's degree at City College and is on track to receive a bachelor's degree in health education from San Francisco State University in May 2015. She attends school full-time and works 30 hours each week at Trader Joe's. She also works 20 hours a week as a certified domestic violence counselor at the Riley Center.

When she graduates, she wants to return to the Wellness Initiative as a CHOW. "I know I can really help kids. I feel that I have a lot to offer. I was there not too long ago so I know what high school students are going through," she says. Eventually, she wants to pursue a master's degree and work in the public health field.

"There are times you trip and fall on your face but the important thing is to get back up," Mika says. "If I didn't have people behind me cheering me on to get back up, I probably wouldn't have. That's what the Wellness Center did for me—they were my cheerleaders. I had a whole cheerleading squad behind me. It makes a world of difference. I went from having nobody standing behind me to having an entire trained staff there for me. What Wellness does is really important."

Learn more about the [YOW](#) program.