

## COMMUNITY

# Twenty-first Century Gals

Building both mind and body, a new charter school aims to close the gender gap

BY **Heidi Kyser**

**O**n a Monday afternoon in May, a few dozen tweenage girls tumbled out of five rooms ringing the open central area of the John D. “Jackie” Gaughan Boys and Girls Club and sat cross-legged on Xs taped to the carpet. After a day of taking standardized assessment tests, they were chatty and restless.

With their pink backpacks and poufy ponytails, they looked like typical girls their age, but they were also part of something novel: a program that’s shown success in other regions and has now come to Southern Nevada. It’s an all-girls, tuition-free, charter middle school designed to help close the gender gap, that quaint phrase used to describe everything from the dearth of female scientists running labs to women making 82 cents, on average, to a man’s dollar. Called the Girls Athletic Leadership School, or GALS, it opened a year ago.

“Last reminder!” shouted a young woman in a T-shirt, sweatpants, and sneakers, standing at the front of the room. “If you haven’t turned in your laptop yet, we need it now!”

“We’re just finishing up the SBACs (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium),” Jennifer McCloskey explained, over the din. “It determines the star rating. It will be interesting to see how many stars we get.”

McCloskey is the executive director of the 501(c)3 behind GALS. For the school’s first, incubator year, she struck a deal with the Gaughan Club to hold classes in the building between its before- and after-school recreation hours. But when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the club’s community service, GALS became its sole occupant.

It was an affordable place for the school to get its legs under it, McCloskey said, noting her gratitude. GALS’ charter allows it to have up to 400 students. For its first year, it had just over 100 — five classes of 20 students each — half of whom opted to attend in-person and half online. But this fall, classes resumed in a bigger building several blocks to the east, on Maryland Parkway, where it can grow to its full capacity. McCloskey was expecting 160 students starting August 9.

They rotate among language arts, math, science, social studies, and GALS classes. That last one helps to define the school, beyond its focus on teaching girls. The “GALS” class is, essentially, the social-emotional component of a model meant to teach not just academics, but also physical and mental well-being: mind, body, heart.

Educational entrepreneur Liz Wolfson developed the GALS model about a decade ago based on her conviction that gender-based instruction could give girls the edge they need to live to their full potential once they’re out of school. Wolfson’s first school was in Denver, and there’s now an affiliate in Los Angeles, in addition to the Vegas site. The basic idea is to provide girls, at a critical time in their development, with a supportive environment where they can figure out who they are. The hope is that they’ll gain confidence in themselves, becoming strong self-advocates who make choices based on their needs, rather than others’ expectations.

Kenneth Jones says this is what happened with his daughter, Heaven, whom he describes as a sweet, sensitive girl who had trouble making friends before going to GALS. “She’s really come out of her shell,” he says. “She stands up for herself more. She’ll question things ... I love it.”

Next year, Heaven will go to seventh grade at the zoned school in her mother’s Summerlin neighborhood, Jones says, but he’s glad she got a year at GALS. “I know she’s going to do excellent in her classes. She’s focused, and her confidence is so much higher.”

How does this happen? McCloskey says it’s because of the curriculum, which she describes by ticking off each letter of the acronym. “G” is for the focus on “girls,” which means fewer distractions and more individual attention. “A,” “athletic,” may suggest



sport but is actually more about wellness and the connection between physical movement and good cognitive function. GALS Las Vegas begins each day with 40 minutes of yoga, calisthenics, sprinting — a variety of activities, allowing girls to find what they enjoy and feels good — and movement is incorporated into lessons and breaks. Lastly, the “L” is for “leadership,” a catch-all for the social-emotional component, teaching a range of soft skills, from coping with stress to effective communication.

... Which sounds great, but raises questions. For starters: How do you define “girl” (or take public funding for education if you’re discriminating based on gender)? McCloskey says, “We are an open school, and we would absolutely enroll a boy if they wanted to attend. No boy has applied, but if one did, we would explain to their parents that we specialize in and cater to the needs of adolescent girls. If that works for them, then it works for us as well.” She adds that other GALS schools have had both boys and transgender kids.

Another question: Is it a disservice to girls, socially, to teach them coping skills in such



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The GALS learning model aims to move students' bodies and minds.



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a carefully controlled — and thus, unrealistic — environment? McCloskey says GALS probably isn't the right school for someone who believes that. In any case, the benefits of gender-focused education outweigh the risks.

To illustrate why, she gives the personal examples of her own middle school-aged daughter, who was bullied and harassed by boys in her accelerated science classes. "They basically told her that her place was in the kitchen," McCloskey says. "The only thing I can think of is that these boys were threatened by her intelligence and wanted to hold her back."

She says her daughter "muscled through the oppression," but not every girl can do that, and none should have to.

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Twelve-year-old Jamya, whose last name we were asked not to use, says GALS was her mother's idea, but she was happy about it. "All the schools I've gone to are boys and girls," Jamya says. "The boys are the problem. I've been bullied from them for two years in a row." Krista Yarberry, GALS' head of school (their term for "principal"), adds that harassment is sometimes physical, too.

A 30-year educator, Yarberry says her favorite part of the job is the community GALS serves. In the heart of the 89119 zip code, the school's student body comprises 85 percent children from surrounding neighborhoods and is more than 90 percent Black, Indigenous and other people of color. She describes the school's administration, staff, and families as a tight-knit group. She knows every student by name. Parents have her personal mobile phone number and use it. It's intense, she says, but some of the pressure should let up with the larger building and waning COVID restrictions.

"I do not recommend opening a school during a pandemic," she deadpans. "It's stressful. But it's worth it."

McCloskey agrees. A few years ago, after being diagnosed with cancer, she left her job as a Bureau of Reclamation deputy regional director. She found she couldn't care for herself and two daughters as well as she wanted to with such a demanding career in a stressful environment. As her health situation improved, she decided opening a school was something she could do to make a difference.

"I look at my mom's experiences," she says. "I look at my life. I look at my daughters and how frustrated they've been with gender issues and discrimination. And I felt like, I've got to do something. I've got to break the mold. My legacy has to be doing something about this." ♦



## PROFILE

# High Adventure

Cannabis is legal. Dungeons & Dragons is making a comeback. Brandon McClenahan combined the two in a popular streaming show

BY **Jason Harris**

**T**his single-story home looks normal enough from the street. It's an older, ranch-style house, the kind built in this area decades ago, long before strips malls and subdivisions came to dominate northwest Las Vegas.

But around the back of the house is a set of industrial trailers. Inside one of them on a recent Saturday morning, a band of adventurers with names such as Rial Othrevan and Tynna Smoothhands is locked in battle with a powerful undead creature named Aeromastus. It's just one fantastic fight in the adventurers' ultimate quest to defeat the Lord of Shadows, Sithesis, who threatens to destroy the human realm entirely.

Don't worry. Fortunately for us living in the human realm, it's not real. It's a live-streamed game of Dungeons & Dragons organized by local actor Brandon Alan

McClenahan that he calls "WeeDnD," produced from one of the backyard trailers in his northwest compound.

"WeeDnD is a cannabis-positive, collaborative storytelling experience," says McClenahan, who serves as the game master — that is, the narrator and referee. "It's a completely original show every week. It stars a cast of some of the finest entertainers from around Las Vegas. It's a party."

Pot? D&D? This makes McClenahan sound like a slacker, but he's actually an entrepreneur. Last year, he combined his two favorite pastimes and launched what's become a popular weekly Twitch stream in which costumed players get high, slay monsters, and grab treasure.

On this Saturday, Jake Taylor, Brenna Folger, Drew Yonemori and Abby Dandy — all local actors, too — are the intrepid adventurers, connected via webcams, rolling