



## Program strives to empower teens

By Maritza Velazquez, Staff Writer



Teens participate in the Teen Empowerment Workshop led by Lisa Nichols and her staff on Dec. 1, 2007 at the LeRoy Haynes Center in La Verne. (Photos courtesy of Jeff Schenkel)

Like many kids today, Lisa Nichols had a hard time making the transition from childhood to adulthood.

She struggled with loving herself and finding who she was supposed to be during her teenage years.

"I had a wonderful family, but I struggled with loving myself for whatever reason," the Redondo Beach resident said. "And I said if I ever get over this ugly feeling, I want to spend my life supporting other teens to help them get out of it."

On Dec. 1 and 2, the single mother and author of Chicken Soup for the African American Soul helped more than 100 teens with their issues during a two-day Teen Empowerment Workshop at the LeRoy Haynes Center in La Verne.

When Critter Canfield's parents told him about the workshop, he was reluctant to attend.

That was until he talked to Nichols, who was a close family friend and the founder of Motivating the Teen Spirit, LLC.

She told him that he didn't have to come. But that she would love him anyway.

That was it. He agreed to make his way from Santa Barbara with his parents, Inga and Jack Canfield, who is the founder of the Chicken Soup for the Soul Enterprises, Inc.

It transformed his way of thinking and he looks at life much differently because of it.

"(I learned) that underneath all of the things we put on, like our masks, we all want the same thing," the 17-year-old said. "We all want love."

What the program offers was a "safe space" for teens to be open and let down their guards, because Nichols said, "teens feel more judged than anyone."

Before the workshop began, the adolescents agreed to three things: no judgement, no repercussions and unconditional love.

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"We create an environment where we level the playing field between us and them," Nichols said. "We are no longer dictating to them, we're in conversation with them. They're not used to that and it brings out a different part of them."

Within the first hour, she set the tone by letting her own guard down. She told the audience that she was molested when she was younger.

The kids were then allowed to share their own experiences and thoughts. If anyone had similar experiences, or felt the same way, they raised their hands to let the speaker know that they weren't alone.

It was all interactive, with the teens participating in various exercises. One exercise on Sunday, Dec. 2, allowed the kids to tell a partner in the group who they have hurt in their lives by their words or actions.

The partners would go back and forth, revealing their hurtful actions, what they take responsibility for and how they are paying for it now.

The entire program was paid in full by the BNI-Misner Charitable Foundation, founded by Ivan Misner, who is on the board of directors for the LeRoy Haynes Center.

"She's changing kids' lives who had a lot of personal problems," Misner of Claremont said. "I was so impressed with the pieces of the programs that I saw, that I said I would love to

bring her out."

Participants came from around the San Gabriel Valley, Los Angeles and throughout Southern California.

Some of the teens came from the LeRoy Haynes Center's residential program. The La Verne campus houses about 72 children and provides services to emotionally troubled, abused or neglected children and their families.

"I think that (the workshop) is going to have a huge impact in helping them understand that their past does not have to be their future," Misner said. "They can define themselves by the good things going on in their lives as opposed to the things that had happened in the past."

For more information on Lisa Nichols and Motivating the Teen Spirit, LLC, [www.motivatingtheteenspirit.com](http://www.motivatingtheteenspirit.com).

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