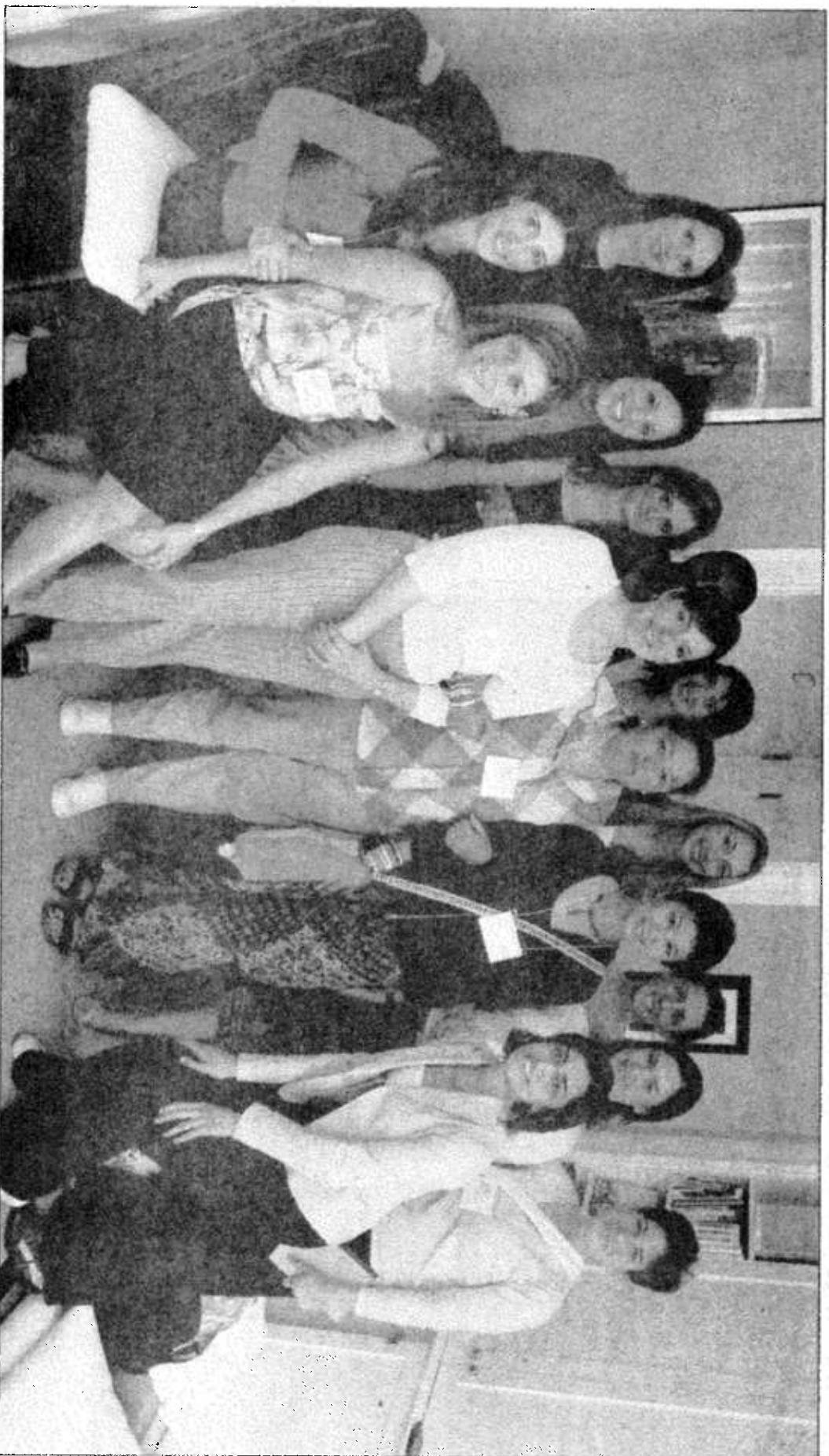


BAY AREA BUSINESS WOMAN

Your Trusted Source for News, Trends & Lifestyle Issues

Vol. 14 No. 11 August 2007



Speak members host Patricia Cervantes, a mother from Juarez, Mexico, whose daughter Nerya was mysteriously murdered in 2003. Speak has taken part in fundraising and advocacy efforts to support women in Juarez like Patricia, who are fighting for justice for the mass disappearances of young girls in the region.

Local Organization Sparks Global Action

By Kenya McCullum

Since 2004, the San Francisco-based organization Spark has been helping young professionals — who range in age from 25 to 45 years old — ignite their interest and dedication to the plight of women and girls around the world, while building a community of people who do are interested in doing good works.

President and co-founder Kathleen Kelly believes that Spark is the perfect opportunity for busy, young professionals to become involved in worthy causes. Because many young professionals are busy building their careers and lives, Spark allows members to be engaged in philanthropic work than can easily fit into their hectic schedules — an opportunity that Kelly said has been difficult for many of them to find.

"A lot of us were coming out of school and starting to work in the professional world, realizing that there weren't a lot of opportunities for young people to be engaged in meaningful ways," she said.

"We founded Spark as a way to engage young professionals in global women's issues and to really create community around the idea of giving back through philanthropy. It really gives young people an option to be able to have hands-on volunteering opportunities for our grantees here, and to collaborate in a lot of different, more unique ways."

Among some of the causes that Spark has been involved with include the Campaign for Female Education, a group that is dedicated to sending African girls to school; Girls on the Run, which supports athletic training programs for young girls; Oasis for Girls, which provides tutoring for

underprivileged students; and Circulo de Vida, which supports Bay Area women living with breast cancer.

Spark chooses its grantees based on the stories of human drama behind them. Kelly said that when a story has both local and global ramifications, and expresses the importance of female empowerment, it is a good example of cause that Spark is interested in putting its support behind.

"What we really look for are stories that we can tell, because it's the stories of these women who are empowering themselves in their communities that really touch people, engage people in the giving process, and make it a really holistic experience," said Kelly. "Members learn about the grantee's story, they understand where the money is going, and their heart is really in the giving process—instead of an anonymous donation to a large non-profit organization where they don't know if the money is going to administrative funds or to what."

In addition to the stories behind the causes Spark supports, another feature that makes the organization unique and successful is its model for supporting these causes, which includes community building, which provides an opportunity for education and volunteerism around women's issues; political advocacy through supporting policy initiatives globally and locally; and grant making, giving the organization the capacity to make a positive social change in communities by providing funds to a worthy cause.

Because of these unique qualities, Spark has become a perfect fit for young professionals who want to make a difference in the global community and the organization has attracted a network of over 2,500 people who work in diverse backgrounds from non-profit organizations to financial services companies to the legal community. Although Spark sponsors events that have a networking element to them, members enjoy that they are truly making contributions that improve the lives of women and girls around the world.

"I think sometimes some organizations will have an event and it will just be the party aspect of it, so we always kind of focus on making sure that the event is focused on sponsoring one specific organization so that people know, 'I'm going to attend this event and the fee that they're charging at the door is going partially to this group of women,'" said Nancy Reyes, Spark's membership coordinator. "So there's a closer connection between what you're doing and where it's going."

But even though Spark's mission is a serious one, members also find it appealing that the organization's events — in addition to being worthwhile — are also fun.

"Spark is really fun. You're going to meet great people and you're going to be spending the limited time you have as a young professional in a really meaningful way," said Executive Director Shannon Farley. "You can go to the movies, or in one night at one event send nine girls to school in Zimbabwe, while you're meeting incredible people and having a lot of fun while you're doing it."

Upcoming Spark events include the Black and Pink Ball, which will be held at the Julia Morgan Ballroom on October 12. For more information about Spark, go to www.sparksf.org. ▲

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