

Jump Start's Tree Raffle Benefits Students In Need



—Photo by Ashleigh Oldland

WIN THESE TREES. Three lady volunteers sell raffle tickets for Operation Jump Start's Holiday Gallery of Trees outside of Chase Bank on Second Street.

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By Ashleigh Oldland
Staff Writer

Operation Jump Start's Holiday Gallery of Trees has brought bow-topped and colorfully decorated miniature evergreens to Second Street's sidewalk for the eighth consecutive year.

The annual fund-raising raffle for OJS helps support the nonprofit's mentoring programs.

"We want low-income students who are performing well to continue performing well," said OJS Executive Director Dara Cerwonka. "We want to provide structure and resources for them to reach their potential."

Of the students who participate in the program, 98% graduate high school and 83% go on to attend a four-year university. Typically, Cerwonka said about 60 students participate in the program annually.

The Holiday Gallery of Trees, on display outside Chase Bank, is a raffle of 20 beautifully decorated Christmas trees each worth \$150 of merchandise or gift cards donated by Long Beach businesses. There also are two mini trees being sold through a silent auction.

"The money we raise helps us provide enrichment programs and foster students' ability to go on to college," Cerwonka said. "The work we are doing is so important, especially with all the education cuts plaguing the country in recent years. This is a way to help students achieve their goals."

Michelle Luna, a sophomore at Poly High School, has been receiving help from her mentor and tutors at OJS for more than a year.

"For me this is such a blessing," she said. "I have a mentor and she is the greatest mentor I would ever wish for. And, I use the tutoring to keep my grades up."

Luna, who aspires to be a doctor with the U.S. Army, said she plans to return to Long Beach someday and become a mentor herself.

Jhofelle Estrada, OJS development coordinator, said OJS still needs businesses to sponsor trees for the holiday raffle.

"I know this doesn't help all the kids in Long Beach, but it is a start," she said. "This is a chance to do something and make a difference, even if it is just for a handful of kids."

The Holiday Gallery of Trees raffle will be ongoing during the day from Dec. 15 through Dec. 23 outside of Chase Bank at 5200 E. Second St. Hours may vary, but volunteers are typically there from noon to 8 p.m. Raffle tickets are \$2 for one ticket or \$3 for five tickets.

OJS is always recruiting new tutors and mentors — with or without previous mentoring experience. Mentors, who stay with an individual student though that student's senior year of high school, devote about six to eight hours each month to their mentee, Cerwonka said.

For details about OJS, call 988-2131 or visit www.operationjumpstart.org.