

Providing leadership, menstrual products to girls and women in Havasu

By LA'ERICA CONNER-SIMS
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Period poverty is an issue that people may be unfamiliar with. It centers around the lack of access to necessary menstrual supplies and education one might face due to income limitations, insufficient transportation, or unavailability at school or their place of employment.

The public health issue is what three local community members aim to fight with the creation of their nonprofit organization, Havasu Helping Girls. The nonprofit focuses on combating period poverty within Lake Havasu City by

providing menstrual products to girls and women.

Tony Contratto, President and Chief Executive Officer of Havasu Helping Girls, finds the issue to be prevalent among women and girls and desires to help those in Havasu who might be affected.

"A study just came out from 2021 where it was like 68 percent of people agree that period poverty is a national health issue but only four percent of people know of a local resource available that can help people with free or low-cost period supplies," Contratto said. "It's quite the disparity there still."

After its creation in



La'Erica Conner-Sims/Today's News-Herald
Pictured is Havasu Helping Girls' Vice President Kayla Feasel (Left), President and Chief Executive Officer Tony Contratto (Center), and Treasurer Jodi Subject at their office in Lake Havasu City.

2021, Havasu Helping Girls began providing period starter kits and other menstrual products for teenage

girls as well as for women. "We [combat period poverty] in a couple differ-

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ent ways. One is providing free period supplies to anybody in need or to anybody who lacks access to them. Another way is we have a separate program for tween and teen girls where we provide free period starter kits to help them prepare for their first period," Contratto added. "That includes a make-up bag with enough period supplies to get through the first day or two and an informational booklet of what to expect."

The organization plans to add classes that teach leadership skills to junior high and high school-aged girls to the list of services that they offer. Their approach for providing the classes deals with helping the teenagers build up their self-confidence.

"I think the statistics were that a girl's confidence peaks at about eight or nine years old and then just steadily declines from there," Contratto said. "There's been a few studies that show around one in five girls between the tween and teen ages said that they believe they have the skills or the ability to become a leader in their life whereas 95 percent of boys the same age said that they think they have the ability to become a leader in life. There's quite the gap there which we kind of want to address."

Treasurer Jodi Subjeck adds that their organization is heavily focused on spreading awareness on an issue that is not normally talked about.

"It's a global issue, it's not a small issue. We all need to talk about it. We all need to be comfortable talking about it no matter who is talking about it and understand that we are here to help. Hopefully, the community sees that and so far for the most part, they really have been adapting to it," Subjeck said. "We're just shedding a light on something that just hasn't had a light shone on it yet."

This past May, Havasu Helping Girls held their first in-person event that created a welcoming atmosphere for families to learn more about period poverty. The event was held at Rotary Park and was a way for the organization's members to interact with the local community.

"That was the main event we did over the weekend which was kind of to have that conversation with people," Subjeck continued. "There were a couple of guys who came with their wives who were like, 'I didn't know this was an issue.'"

According to Contratto, his organization has distributed around 160 period starter kits this year for tween and teenage girls. Over several hundred tampons and pads have been given out across all age groups.

"We hope to be able to help anybody in

Havasu who needs it whether that's through partnerships with the schools where we give them period supplies and they distribute them as needed to anybody," Contratto continued. "Or whether it's us delivering products on a monthly basis."

The website for the nonprofit is home to an online store where visitors can sign up for a monthly subscription at no charge to them. There is a small shipping charge added to all online orders. Those who reside within the limits of Lake Havasu City are not charged for shipping.

"You can customize or you can order a period starter kit. It'll ask you for the options that you desire. They all come with a make-up bag and you can specify whether you want tampons or pads, we'll put feminine wipes in there if you want those and a pair of back-up underwear," Contratto said. "We deliver it to you or make it available at the office if you want to come pick it up."

Raising awareness of who period poverty affects and what can be done to combat the global issue is at the forefront of the organization. The members plan to educate the local community on ways they can help and aim to supply local schools with period supplies for students.

"The average age now is 11.9 years old when you're starting your first period. Chances are very good that you're going to be in school," Contratto said. "Nobody should have to miss work and no girl should miss a class and possibly fall behind on their education just because they can't access period products."

The stigma behind purchasing feminine hygiene products is another factor that the organization hopes to address in their local community.

"It's something that is kind of hushed and so it's an issue that kind of flies under the radar because of the social stigma attached to talking about it still," Contratto said. "Just look at television and all the jokes. The television show where the guy goes to buy tampons for his daughter and he's trying to hide it under his arm."

Bringing a positive light to the issue of period poverty is what the organization wants to accomplish. They hope to lessen the shame that comes from speaking about a girl's or woman's menstruation cycle.

"It's a very kind of taboo discussion for a father to have with their daughter," Subjeck said. "It doesn't mean it's a taboo issue or it shouldn't be brought up in the household. Hopefully these starter kits that have the pamphlets that are very much detailed will help those discussions go a little bit easier for those males."

The treasurer goes on to mention the lack of access school-aged girls may face when experiencing a period-related accident during school hours.

"I'm sure every girl has one story from

school where they had an accident or a close friend of theirs did and they had no supplies and had to call their mom who had to bring something down," Subjeck continued. "Not everyone has access to just call their parents who might be working who can't bring something. So, then you're just stuck and it's embarrassing."

Vice President Kayla Feasel wants to use their organization to educate the community on the dangers of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS). According to Mayo Clinic, TSS can occur in women who are menstruating with symptoms ranging from a sudden high fever to seizures. It can be caused by staph bacteria for menstruating women and by strep bacteria for people of all ages. The use of certain tampons and menstrual cups can lead to the occurrence of TSS.

"My main thing that I like, other than supplying period supplies, is we also educate on toxic shock," Feasel said. "That's one of the things I like. I want people to know about toxic shock and that it is real and that it happens."

The Havasu community can become involved in the organization's efforts to lessen period poverty by donating supplies or by sharing about the nonprofit on social media.

"The community can easily have an impact when donating any amount. Even ten dollars can provide enough period supplies for one or two women for a month," Contratto added. "If you go to our website, if you just want to buy a box of pads or tampons and bring them in and drop them off, that's totally fine."

In addition to raising awareness about period poverty within Havasu, the nonprofit hopes to expand to the surrounding areas to bring their mission to other cities.

"I think getting started in a small town is kind of special and unique. It brings a

different light to Havasu," Subjeck said. "Hopefully within this next year, trying to get into these different avenues and putting on these different events, the word will spread. It will spread beyond Havasu and spread to Bullhead and Kingman and beyond to Phoenix and to outside the borders of this state so people can understand that this is an issue that needs to be addressed and it can be addressed."

Moving past providing schools with supplies, there is also talk to offer local women's shelters, food banks, and senior residences with the appropriate hygiene products.

"We could branch out not just to the girls or to women but also to the elderly," Subjeck added. "They need diaper supplies and other kinds of supplies like that so we can branch into that possibly here in the next year."

Helping parents gain the knowledge to prepare their children for the start of a menstrual cycle is what Contratto aims to accomplish. The president and CEO hopes to move parents and their children out of the stigmas that surround the topic.

"If it's influencing a single father or even a mother to have that discussion with their child, boys or girls, when they're younger so they're prepared and they know what's coming up," Contratto continued. "Teaching them that this is a normal part of life. There's nothing that we should be making fun of or stigmatizing. To kind of break those barriers down and make it something okay to talk about."

With help from the local community spreading the word about the organization, the members of Havasu Helping Girls look forward to the support they receive from those they encounter.

For more information about Havasu Helping Girls, visit their website at www.havasuhelpinggirls.com.

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