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Students from Pacoima Middle School Will be Among the LA Marathon's Youngest Runners

by **Gabriel Arizon, San Fernando Valley Sun/El Sol**

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Three girls from Pacoima Middle School train for the Los Angeles Marathon as part of the SRLA program. (SFVS/G. Arizon)

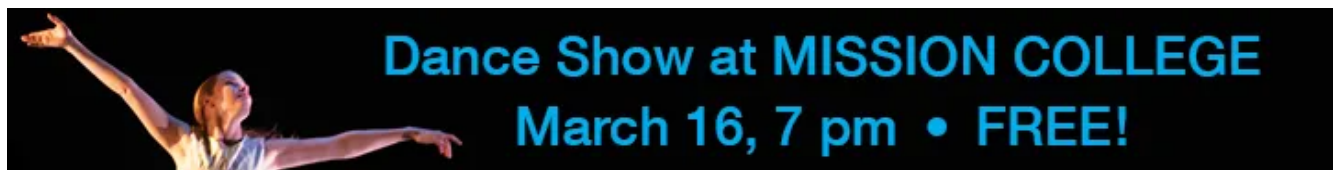
On a sunny Monday afternoon, a group of students from Pacoima Middle School laced up their running shoes and put on their uniforms for one of their last practice runs just days away from the main event: the Los Angeles Marathon.

On Sunday, March 19, 11 students from the local middle school will join 2,500 other students from 185 school groups — including at least 54 middle schools — from the greater LA area to participate in the annual Marathon. Students from San Fernando High School, Nobel Middle School, Van Nuys High School and Maclay Middle School are also participating.

These students are part of Students Run LA (SRLA), a nonprofit program founded in 1989 that provides free youth mentoring and marathon training. Students can apply for the program starting in seventh grade, meaning many of these participating students are in their early teens.



SRLA leaders and runners from Pacoima Middle School in their running attire. They gathered at the PE field on March 13, less than a week away from the Los Angeles Marathon.



The Marathon is the culmination of months of hard work and preparation for these students, including 14-year-old Bianca. Like many other students, this will be her first time participating. Although the longest distance she has practiced running is 18 miles, Bianca feels confident to take on the full 26.2 mile race.

“It’s a little nerve-racking, knowing how close it is, but I’m not really scared,” said Bianca, who declined to provide her last name. “[I’m] more excited because I worked so hard to get here, and I don’t doubt that I can do it.”

She first heard about SRLA last year in seventh grade when a friend of hers joined the program. She eventually grew interested in the program but had to wait another year after sign-ups had ended.



Two girls in the SRLA program at Pacoima Middle School ran around the PE field for one of their last practice runs. They will participate in the LA Marathon on Sunday, March 19.

Bianca said she wasn't physically active before joining SRLA, which made it more difficult during the first few practices. Bianca admitted that early on, she didn't think she would be able to finish the Marathon. It wasn't until she was running a 30K race that it suddenly started to click for her.

“Towards the last three miles, it was really tough getting through it, but I kind of just kept thinking, ‘if I can get through this, then I can get through the Marathon,’” Bianca said. “[After that,] it was more like, ‘I’m doing this, I know I can do the Marathon.’ And I started getting more excited and less nervous about it.”

Now, she enjoys running — especially the races — and said that she wants to keep on doing it. And with that enjoyment comes confidence, both on and off the track.

“I feel like running kind of helped me express myself a little bit better,” Bianca said. “It’s definitely made me feel a lot more confident. And when I feel sad or angry, I can just put that energy into something positive.”

Bianca isn't alone in her excitement. Fellow eighth-grader Ashley is looking forward to the Marathon. But for her, this will be her second time.

Ashley heard about SRLA through one of her teachers and thought it would be a great way to get some exercise, but most of all, she was excited to participate in a marathon.

“The beginning before [the Marathon], I was anxious, but going through it, I was like, ‘Oh, this is nice,’” Ashley recounted. “Then at the end, I was tired ... but I was like, ‘Yeah, I did that. I want to run another one.’”

She initially wasn't into running, but she grew to like it. Eventually, Ashley found herself becoming more active and trying more in classes that she didn't enjoy much beforehand.

One of her favorite parts of running in races like the Marathon, besides the feeling of accomplishment upon finishing, is taking in the various locales where these events take place.

“I love the pretty sights ... like Chinatown for the Homeboy [5K Walk/Run in partnership with Homeboy Industries] and the beginning of the Marathon [is] stunning,” Ashley said. “And then going to Hollywood and Beverly Hills was also really nice. And the one in Pasadena, that's a really pretty race. I love that race so much.”

This year, Ashley said she's having more fun in the program now that her friends have joined and will be running alongside her, and she's looking forward to receiving another medal to show off to her relatives.

“[What] I enjoy the most is hanging out with my teammates and getting to know them because [they're] people I would have never met if it wasn't for this program,” she said.

From Runner to Coach

One of the SRLA leaders at Pacoima Middle is seventh-grade science teacher Rachel Rodriguez, who has been at the school for 22 years and has co-coached the program since 2006.

Rodriguez herself was a participant in SRLA when she was a senior at Francisco Bravo Medical Magnet High School in 1994. She became a coach at the school at a friend's suggestion, but initially wasn't sure if she could make the time commitment. However, Rodriguez grew to love the work and the young students who participated.

"These kids are everything. They're your life," Rodriguez said. "I tell them I'll be your biggest cheerleader; I'm going to get you through. And they rely on you to lead them in the right direction. Not only on the courses that we're running, but even in school."

Rodriguez co-coaches with Charlie Koski, a math teacher who ran SRLA at the school before she joined. Rodriguez describes herself as the "mama bear" of the program — pushing the kids during their workouts while Koski handles paperwork and the training regimen.

When it comes to running in races, Rodriguez makes it her goal to finish as fast as possible so that she can cheer on her students when they're roughly close to the finish line. She wants to cheer on her students, especially those who run at a slower pace, and whoever the last person is, Rodriguez will help run them across the finish line.

The Experience Can Be Life Changing

Rodriguez has seen many kids go through the program, each with their own story, but the ones that stick out to her, she said, are the ones who have struggled the most — either with their home life or other personal issues. Even just receiving their first pair of running shoes has an impact on them. Those students, Rodriguez said, have the biggest successes.

“I just got in contact with one [former Pacoima Middle School runner], he’s ... in the process of becoming a police officer. I have another who posted she got her registered nursing license,” Rodriguez recounted. “They contact me and say, ‘Thank you.’”

Part of Rodriguez’s challenge over the course of SRLA, however, is keeping the young student runners in the program. Whereas some other schools, like Nobel Middle in Northridge, don’t have enough spots to offer all the students who apply, Pacoima Middle has the opposite problem. This year’s team dropped from 17 students to 11.

It’s not a question of whether they’re motivated enough. Some students lack transportation to take them to races or back home. At times, Rodriguez has taken her students to and from running events so they can participate.

Keeping them in SRLA is the hardest part, Rodriguez said, but she finds that it’s worth the effort.

“Encouraging them to keep going, both in the classroom and outside the classroom is a challenge — and it’s worth the rewards that come with it,” Rodriguez said.

“The idea of keeping the kids in so that they can see their own potential is what can be the hardest —they’re all capable and they just have to believe in themselves.

“Anybody can run a marathon. You just have to say yes.”

The LA Marathon will start at Dodger Stadium at 6:30 a.m. The 26.2-mile course will cross through Downtown LA, Echo Park, Hollywood, West Hollywood and Beverly Hills before ending on the Avenue of the Stars.

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