

Program offers a different path for young women who want to grow, conquer challenges

By RAY PITZ  
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Elissa Rico vividly recalls attending last spring's graduation ceremony for the BecomeX program.



**BALANCING SKILLS** — Janiah Lake, left, manager of the Pearl District Washington Mutual, reviews a check ledger with BecomeX graduates Cassandra Honeywell, Katie Eison-Washington and Melissa Rico. BecomeX teaches career and life skills to young women.

RAY PITZ / The Times

# BECOMING NEW LIVES

Although her mother isn't fluent in English and couldn't understand everything her daughter was saying, she was crying as Rico gave her speech.

Rico was part of a small group of young woman who had completed the BecomeX program, a non-profit organization that provides career and life skills development for young women.

For Rico, moving to the Portland area from California was difficult and she was having a hard time adjusting to her new environment.

"At that point, my self-confidence and self-esteem was really low because I wasn't graduating from high school," said Rico, who also is enrolled in the Beaverton School District's Early College High School at Portland Community College's Rock Creek Campus.

She thought BecomeX, aimed at young women ages 16 to 29, would be a good fit. And although she hasn't felt the full impact yet, it's evident to her mother.

"She sees me as I've become a strong woman," said Rico.

The impetus for BecomeX, which offers its 11-week course in Portland's Pearl District, came from founder Michele O'Hara in response to the death of her 19-year-old niece who committed suicide.

O'Hara said that in the past several years it has become apparent that soci-

## READY FOR CLASS

New classes for BecomeX begin April 10 with the young adult classes for older women set April 11. Although tuition is \$950, about 80 percent of the girls receive full or partial scholarships.

Applications are available on the Web site, [www.becomex.org](http://www.becomex.org); or call 503-222-2087 for more information.

BecomeX will host its annual fundraiser, "Shimmer and Shine: Live from the Inside Out," March 12 at the Gerding Theater, 128 N.W. 11th Ave. It includes a cocktail reception followed by a formal program featuring BecomeX graduates at 7:30 p.m.

To order tickets, which are \$35, go online to [www.becomex.org/shine](http://www.becomex.org/shine).

ety was "failing to provide our young women with the support, validation and skills they need to be strong, happy and confident."

"Michele's always had a special place in her heart for young women," said Anca Micurescu, community relations director for BecomeX. "Our mission statement is to help young women

live lives directed by choice, not by circumstance."

### Self-discovery

During the weekly program, students delve into topics like self-discovery, wellness and fitness, self-defense, skin care and makeup, career and college development skills, financial management, personal style and self-expression.

During the program, the girls also write a manifesto of sorts that addresses such things as what they want to accomplish in their lives.

"That gets you thinking, 'What do I want to contribute to the world?'" said Micurescu.

So far, 84 women have graduated from the program, which celebrated its second anniversary last month.

"Every one of our classes is taught by a professional from the Portland community," said Micurescu.

Janiah Lake, branch manager for the Pearl District Washington Mutual, said the bank became one of the program's sponsors at the end of last year.

"We sponsor the financial education pieces," said Lake. "It's one of the big ways Washington Mutual likes to give

back to the community."

Micurescu said the self-discovery part of the classes include exercises designed to help girls understand how they see themselves. They also give the girls a chance to create a list of what they want to do with their lives.

Rico found the class beneficial.

"I honestly feel like the best class was self-discovery," said Rico. "I became more aware of who I was, where I want to go."

Another student, Katie Eison-Washington, who also relocated to the Portland area from California, joined BecomeX because she was having a hard time "finding my place" at school.

Eison-Washington, a junior at Catlin Gabel, said her favorite part of the program was the self-defense class, recalling the point when she was able to forcefully yell "No!" and "mean it," she said.

"I know how to attempt to defend myself," said Eison-Washington. "I just feel more safe on my own now."

Also, Eison-Washington said the class has made her more confident and she notices she talks to people more. She's more comfortable with herself, realizing, "I don't have to live by anyone else's standards."