

The Dallas Morning News

NEWS INSPIRED

The difference makers: These North Texans help bring light to dark times

Quietly and with compassion, they're making a positive impact in the community.



Natalie Cain (left), program facilitator for Girls Inc. of Metropolitan Dallas, enjoys a celebratory moment with two children who she mentors, sisters Aubrey Mendez (center), 10, and Destini King, 7, at the girls' home in North Dallas. Cain says she connects with the girls several times each week. (Lynda M. Gonzalez / Staff Photographer)

By [Holly Haber](#)
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A global health crisis that keeps people apart hasn't stopped a cadre of North Texas residents from the important work of making the world a better place.

Whether it's helping launch a new child care facility at Parkland Hospital, teaching art therapy to cancer patients, fighting blood disorders, offering Zoom tutoring for struggling distance learners or performing virtual mariachi concerts, these teachers, health care workers, community professionals and volunteers take only "yes" for an answer.

The beat goes on

Mariachi band at Travis Middle School

Nadia Eimandoust, orchestra and mariachi director at Travis Middle School in Irving, and her students got a lot of attention when she made a video of the young musicians performing a mariachi song and posted it on Facebook.

It prompted local parent Maria Rivera to make a request: Would Eimandoust and the talented kids be willing to do a song for her son Christopher's 6th birthday on May 22?



Nadia Eimandoust (center), the orchestra and mariachi director at Travis Middle School in Irving, led her students in performing a song for a 6-year-old's birthday. (Lawrence Jenkins / Special Contributor)

“She said he is missing his friends during this lockdown, and, since they are unable to celebrate his birthday in person with him, she believes a personalized serenade from our mariachi group would be a wonderful birthday surprise,” Eimandoust says.

The kids each recorded their respective parts of the Mexican birthday song “Las Mañanitas,” and Eimandoust combined them all into a video. Even some of her former students who are now in high school contributed. The group continues to receive requests and may end up with a few performances this summer, she says.

Eimandoust says she and the students were thrilled to create the birthday video. “They put a lot of heart into this project by dressing up in their mariachi clothes and wearing birthday party hats for Chris. It’s amazing to see these kids come together during this lockdown and still share their beautiful music, even if it’s through a virtual platform. The Travis mariachi program has definitely unified students, teachers and families alike.”

Even better, the group was invited to his drive-by birthday party.

“We were able to surprise him with a live, socially distant serenade,” Eimandoust says. “Chris and his family enjoyed the live performance immensely.”

‘Where the need is greatest’

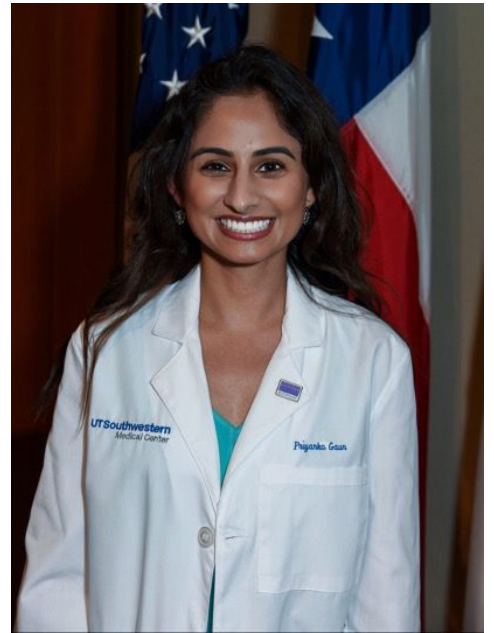
Dr. Priyanka Gaur

Dr. Priyanka Gaur says she’d like to work in a big public hospital. She recently completed her final year at UT Southwestern Medical School and is bound for Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore this summer to start her residency in gynecology and obstetrics.

“It has to do with this moral duty of service,” Gaur says. “I gravitate to where the need is greatest, and I have found the most inspirational moments and greatest learning opportunities came from my patients at Parkland.”

Gaur, who also holds a master’s degree in public health, played a pivotal role in establishing the need for a child care facility at Parkland Hospital, which will make it easier for low-income cancer patients with kids to receive treatments. Annie’s Place —named after patient Annie Nace, who died after a five-year battle with cancer — is expected to open this fall. Gaur says she intends to work with underserved populations throughout her career.

The new doctor was awarded the Ho Din Award this spring by the Southwestern Medical Foundation. It’s a yearly award to an exceptional doctoral graduate who is distinguished by compassion and human understanding as well as exceptional academic performance.



Dr. Priyanka Gaur recently completed her final year at UT Southwestern Medical School and is bound for Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore this summer to start her residency in gynecology and obstetrics. (UT Southwestern Medical School)



Girls Inc. program facilitator Natalie Cain (left) has continued to tutor sisters Aubrey Mendez (center), 10, and Destini King, 7, through the COVID-19 pandemic. (Lynda M. Gonzalez / Staff Photographer)

Creating virtual community

Girls Inc.

Girls Inc. of Metropolitan Dallas is accustomed to supporting 200 at-risk kids each week at its three local centers, plus hundreds more via partner agencies.

Now, the organization has moved all of its programming online, including personal tutoring sessions for girls who are struggling with distance learning.

“I’m hearing that you all are stressed,” program facilitator Natalie Cain told some of the agency’s clients during a video conference this spring. “You are not alone in this.”

The charity recruited 49 volunteer tutors to assist the girls via teleconference and avoid the “coronavirus slide.”

“It’s like you have a teacher with you so that you know what you’re doing,” says one middle-schooler who got help with graphing quadratic equations.

As Girls Inc. moves into its summer programs, many of those volunteer tutors are serving as guest speakers and career panelists. The organization is talking with schools and is open to continuing the tutoring over the summer. “The vehicle we use to serve girls may have changed, but the goal has not,” Cain says. “They need us, especially now in these hard times.”

Visit girlsincdallas.org to offer your skills.

Fighting the good fight

DKMS Youth Advisory Board

DKMS, the international nonprofit dedicated to fighting leukemia and other blood disorders, has but one youth advisory board in the United States, and it’s in Dallas.

Fourteen students from seven area high schools have been learning about blood cancers, and they are committed to registering 126 potential bone marrow donors plus raising \$5,670 to cover the cost of swab kits, postage and DNA analyses.

When coronavirus closures prohibited them from recruiting seniors at school, the team created a virtual drive via social media and personal connections. Some of the kids have family members who have been affected by blood cancers, and their passion is strong, says Amy Roseman, U.S. central recruitment coordinator for DKMS.

“It’s been really great to help others who are in a situation similar to my dad when he was diagnosed with leukemia,” says Jake Whitson, who just graduated from Liberty High School in Frisco and is headed for Baylor University. “I’m going to be sure to continue spreading the message and helping DKMS in college.”



Students from area high schools make up the DKMS Youth Advisory Board. (Amy Roseman)

The other students are Naman Bhushan of Shelton School; Thompson Huthnance, Maryrose Rutledge, Charlie Stephens and Ava Williams of Highland Park High School; Stephanie Pfister of Episcopal School of Dallas; Madeline Petrikas, Alexis Rabin and Makayla Woods of the Hockaday School; Regan Pierce of Parish Episcopal School; and Hallie Sternblitz and Amber Syed of Greenhill School.

Their online campaign runs through Aug. 30.

You must be 18 to 64 years old to register and receive a kit. To help out, visit **dkms.org/getinvolved**.

The art of the possible

Cancer Support Community North Texas

Because of their compromised immune systems, cancer patients must be vigilant about quarantine, but that doesn't mean they have to miss out on art therapy.

Cancer Support Community North Texas offers the service online, and the response has been strong, says Stacey Birst-Yates, the counselor who leads the sessions.

"The focus is on control, choice and creative expression during a very difficult time for individuals needing to stay in their homes," she says.

Nearly 2,000 patients and family members have watched the videos since the weekly program began on March 23. Birst-Yates conducts the session via Zoom on Facebook, so some people participate in the live class while others watch at their convenience.

She encourages participants to use whatever's at hand, including found materials like netting, and the charity is raising funds to supply them with art kits.