



In the News

By Tom Ragan
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Worth the right word



Paige Garcia, an ambassador Girl Scout from Troop 556, talks about the project she worked on to help children with special needs. Girl Scout shot hundreds of photos of objects to help special needs students communicate.

Girl Scouts do more than sell cookies these days.

Take Paige Garcia, a

senior at Corona del Mar High School.

In less than a year, she shot more than 300 photographs of basic life necessities, sat down at her computer, then converted them into an educational package for special needs students in the Mission Viejo School District in the form of computer discs.

At a time when school districts are struggling with state cutbacks, Garcia managed to save the school district time and money while helping some 50 families whose special needs children have a hard time communicating. Pictures can help them learn. "It was a special interest to me. It's something that's close to my heart," said Garcia, who has two second cousins with autism. "I know what it's like. I can relate. I know that some students might have communication problems, and that these photos could come in handy."

Garcia was one of seven Girl Scouts in her Newport Harbor Troop No. 556 to receive the Gold Award, one of Scouting's highest honors, last week at a Newport-Mesa Unified School District Board of Education meeting.

But perhaps more importantly, she's a sign of the times: She's a Girl Scout who managed to come up with a computer program that will be put to practical use by a school district.

Bill Thompson, a school psychologist with the Orange County Department of Education, was amazed by the lightning speed with which Garcia managed to help the district while juggling the normal tasks of a junior in high school — her grade level at the time.

She started the project last spring and completed it in fall.

“This project is truly a valuable addition to our students and parents,” Thompson said in a letter to the board last week. “These photographs have been assembled into a five-disc set complete with professional-quality labeling. ... Many of our students are nonverbal and rely on pictures to communicate their wants and needs.”

Thompson said he plans to hand the discs over to the special needs families who can use the photographs inside their homes when they have a hard time coming up with the word.

Known as an “ambassador” within her troop because she’s a couple of years older than the age limit, Garcia went out on her own and took photographs of all sorts of stuff.

She took shots of toasters, appliances, sports equipment and toiletries. From toothpaste to baseball gloves to bicycle helmets to food groups, Garcia did it all on her own, her camera always within grasp.

Often, she had to ask permission of various stores before embarking on a photo shoot. She spent hundreds of hours — not only taking the photos but downloading, organizing and labeling them.

In all, she spent about \$200 of her own money.

And that’s exactly what the intent of the Gold Award is: to give to the community through selfless acts. Garcia said she came up with the idea of the photographs after talking to Johnson at the district.

She’s glad everything worked out OK.

She plans to attend the University of Oregon next year, and she hopes to be a counselor someday or a teacher of special needs students.

“Last year was a tough one,” said Garcia, who not only had to complete the project but also apply to colleges and take the required tests. “I’m glad to be done with everything.”

As for her mother, Betty, she’s proud of her daughter.

“It was a lot of work,” she said. “I witnessed everything. I saw it all come together, and I’m proud of her.”