

TEEN PRESSES ON WITH GOAL OF VACCINATING GIRLS

North County student raising money to buy HPV shots in Tijuana

PETER ROWE • U-T

TIJUANA

Richard Kiy brakes on a rutted, dirt street of a Tijuana *colonia*, unrolls his SUV's window and asks for a passing motorist's help. Where's the school?

Two minutes later, he parks outside an office and runs inside for more directions.

Five minutes after that, he quizzes the women at a street corner kiosk.

Everyone else in the car stays silent, which is understandable. They're lost, too, and the driver doesn't need any distractions. Earlier, on a highway lined with maquiladoras, Kiy had veered left to avoid a pothole, then right to miss a speeding freight truck. His margin for error as narrow as a chalupa, he slalomed between both hazards.

At least one of his passengers seems unconcerned. "I read all the news about the border," said Caitlin Hird, 17. "But it's not as dangerous as it's often portrayed."

Caitlin is a senior at Encinitas' San Dieguito Academy, where she's taking AP government, AP calculus and
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Caitlin Hird (right) visits Tijuana's Escuela Primaria Bilingüe while Marcela Merino discusses the money her group got from Hird to buy vaccines. CHARLIE NEUMAN • U-T

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TIJUANA • Teen says she has received backlash from those who object to the HPV vaccine

FROM A1 advanced journalism. Her after-school activities are just as educational. Since November, she's been raising money — today, she's \$7,155 short of her \$18,000 goal — to vaccinate 100 sixth-grade girls from one of Tijuana's poorer neighborhoods. This amounts to a graduate seminar in international relations, public health and political science.

For many, including at least one presidential candidate, this quest is controversial. That's because Caitlin seeks to immunize these 11-year-old Mexicans against HPV, the human papillomavirus, a sexually transmitted cause of cervical cancer. Some argue that the vaccine is unsafe; others say it encourages children to become sexually active.

Seeking donations for her project, Caitlin has collected bucketloads of both money and criticism. "I've gotten a lot of backlash," she said, "and it hurts."

But she perseveres. That impresses Kiy, the executive director of the International Community Foundation, a National City-based nonprofit sponsoring numerous Baja California health, education and environmental campaigns.

"With the growing level of drug violence, fewer San Diegans are crossing the border



Students at Tijuana's Escuela Primaria Bilingüe line up last month to visit a mobile health clinic and receive information about HPV, the human papillomavirus, a sexually transmitted cause of cervical cancer. CHARLIE NEUMAN • U-T

to get engaged in nonprofit work — or even to give," he said. "It is so refreshing to work with a teen like Caitlin, who looks beyond some of those perceived issues to do something that makes a difference."

That's the idea. First, though, he needs to find that school.

Life lessons

Caitlin is your typical teen, if "typical" means a guitarist/pianist/playwright/tae kwon do black belt (third degree) with a 4.3 GPA. While not bilingual, she's somewhat bicultural. Susan and Mike Hird long ago introduced Caitlin and her brother, Tom, to Baja on trips to Rosarito and Valle de Guadalupe, some-

times with Kiy, one of Mike's Crawford High and Harvard classmates.

The parents also taught other lessons.

"My mom and dad," their daughter said, "raised us to try to look beyond (our) own little world."

Last year, she volunteered to help the foundation run by their family friend. Kiy introduced her to Escuela Primaria Bilingüe, the only public school in Tijuana where classes are taught in Spanish and Mixteco, a language spoken by Oaxaca's Mixtec people.

"I toured the school," she said, "and I met the kids and that was it."

That was welcome news to Marcela Merino, the plain-spoken leader of a local family planning orga-

nization, Fronteras Unidas Pro Salud. The Mixtec population around the school numbers only 200 families. In the past eight years, Merino noted, five of these families had buried women. They had been killed by a preventable disease, cervical cancer.

"We don't have the money to buy the vaccines," Merino told Kiy. "Caitlin is interested in doing something to help these girls? Tell her we need money."

An open mind

Back home in Olivenhain, Caitlin went door to door, asking for donations to this cause. She also spoke to a Rotary meeting in Rancho Santa Fe, then took her audience's questions.

They were direct: "Are you encouraging my 12-year-old daughter to have sex?"

So were Caitlin's answers: "If your daughter believes this vaccination gives her the green light to become sexually active, she needs more education about sexually transmitted diseases."

While the vaccines can help ensure a lifetime without cervical cancer, they do not prevent other venereal diseases — or pregnancies.

Still, the vaccines are controversial. This month, Gov. Jerry Brown signed into

law a measure that allows 12-year-old California girls to get the vaccine without parental notification. And during a recent debate of Republican presidential contenders, Rep. Michele Bachmann slammed Gov. Rick Perry for requiring Texas sixth-graders to be vaccinated against HPV, citing an unnamed supporter whose daughter "suffered mental retardation" after receiving the vaccine.

Doctors insist there is no evidence to support this anecdote, but Bachmann's statements have complicated Caitlin's task.

"After that debate," the student said, "people already have it in their minds that this is something wrong."

Caitlin, who was vaccinated against HPV in 2008, went to school on this issue. "I take these criticisms seriously," she said. "I listen. I read studies. I talk to doctors. I keep an open mind."

"And I always end up in favor of the vaccinations."

Giving back

A left, a right, another right — finally Kiy arrives at the white-walled compound of Escuela Primaria Bilingüe.

On this hot autumn morning, girls in navy skirts and white blouses wait for injections of the HPV vaccine. Several run over to greet

Caitlin; a few shyly ask for her autograph.

"Gracias," she hears over and over. "¡Muchas gracias por todo!"

One by one, the girls enter a Fronteras Unidas trailer, where Dr. Joana Buck Solt-ero swabs their biceps with an antiseptic solution, then delivers the shot.

The girls' parents had been visited by a *promotora*, a Mixteco-speaking woman who explained the vaccine's purpose. Merino noted that the girls, too, had been educated on the procedure.

To prove her point, she calls out, "Girls, what does this vaccination do?"

"It hurts!" one girl jokes. "Typical students, if 'typical' means grade schoolers who hope to become engineers, lawyers and — in at least one case — a photographer."

"Of animals," said Ariana Patricia Lopes, 11, after getting her vaccination.

Caitlin, whose college applications are now being reviewed at Columbia and Harvard, envisions a career in international relations. Or journalism. Or ...

"Something for the common good," she said, "but in a culture that's different than my own."

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