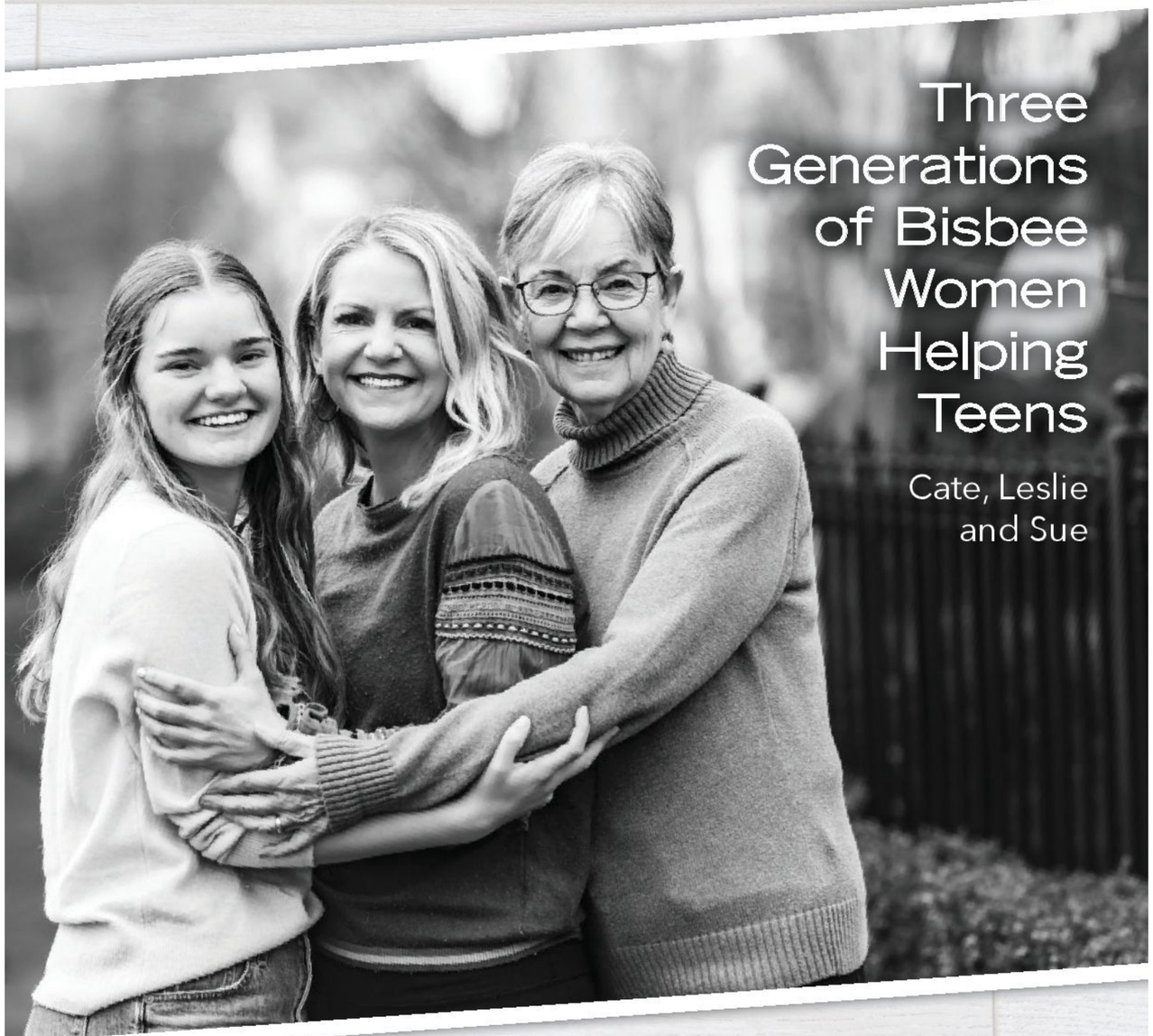
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Mayacamas-Mountain LIVING



Three Generations of Bisbee Women Helping Teens

Cate, Leslie and Sue

POWERED BY BVM BEST VERSION MEDIA

Cover by Leah Mascitelli

Free to Be

By Leslie Bisbee-Jordan



Left to Right: Maya Paris, Whitney Gorman, Milo Wiese, Cate Bisbee, Kaylin Suacci, Mack Friedman, Reese Gorman

Free to Be builds confidence in Sonoma County youth, empowering them to make healthy choices in today's everchanging culture.

Free to Be is a non-profit organization that serves Sonoma County youth by empowering them with tools to make healthy decisions, navigate the ever-changing virtual world, and understand their worth and value. We address the emotional health crisis in our community by partnering with schools and youth-serving organizations to provide engaging and dynamic programs that build resilience and teach life-skills.

THE NEED

According to the 2023 Sonoma County Youth Truth Survey, 51% of high school and 47% of middle school students report feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious as an obstacle to learning.

As reported in the 2021 A Portrait of Sonoma Update, our county has the second-highest youth suicide rate in the nine-county Bay Area region.

OUR FOCUS

Built on a foundation of confidence and a strong sense of personal value and worth, Free to Be desires to HELP the youth of Sonoma County in the following areas:

Healthy Relationships

Emotional Health & Support

Life Online

Positive Choices

OUR APPROACH

STUDENT WORKSHOPS

A series of character-based curricula that addresses each focus topic over a course of 4 sessions, 50 minutes each session. Free to Be discusses healthy ways to cope with stress and how to identify emotional health warning signs for themselves and friends. We share peer pressure refusal strategies to address common pressures for our youth.

TEEN INNOVATORS

Free to Be's dynamic teen leadership program positively influences youth through their sharing of personal stories in the student workshops. These sessions create a comfortable environment that allows more open discussion-giving youth confidence to share and understand that they can have the future they deserve.

PARENT RESOURCES

Free to Be hosts events and online resources that equip parents with relevant up-to-date information, current media trends, and resources and tools to help them navigate the turbulent waters of parenting today's youth.

OUR IMPACT

Post-workshop, 90% feel better prepared to stand up to peer pressure and recognize that they are more likely to make healthy decisions when they are confident.

"It made me really think about how much my confidence is valued and I should not allow people to take that from me." Freshman Student

Want to learn more? Contact:

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Sue Bisbee, Leslie Bisbee-Jordan and Cate Bisbee

By Cindy Butner | Photos by Leah Mascitelli

Three generations of Bisbee women have experience working with teens, children, and their families at local schools through Free to Be.

Sue: The Founder

Sue Bisbee calls her founding of Free to Be a "mom deal." By that, she means that her kids were not involved in the program in its early years. She heard about a program in Modesto that addressed the rapid increase in teen pregnancy when HIV was emerging. It was a scary time for everyone. The program was built around teens talking with teens about navigating life. As the mother of five children who had worked with teens, she thought, "What better way to talk to them about relationship decisions than to hear from their peers? So, I started with a few teens. Three to be exact."



The program consisted of teen panels with no curriculum when they first started. Today, Free to Be trained educators and Teen Innovators teach curriculum in a classroom setting. The group's efforts help a growing number of teens and children, their parents, and educators navigate their formative years, and it's more relevant than ever.

Sue said, "In 1992, I thought, 'It's been many years, and I'm running this thing. I want [the teens] to own it.'So, I put it in their lap and said, what do you think it should be?" She attributes its continued relevance to the ongoing teen leadership. She didn't know then that IBM would release the first smartphone publicly in 1994. By early 2008, 71% of teens used one.



Free to Be programs address relationship decisions against the backdrop of ever-evolving technology.

As a teen, you may know what apps are popular and how they work, but do you



have the life experience, self-confidence, and social skills to interact with others (peers and potential predators) while using them?

As a busy parent, how do you counsel your children and teens about their use of social media when you don't even know the latest apps, how they work, and how your children and others are using them?

How do you counsel students and parents to navigate social media as a teacher or school administrator? How students and others are using it, and what steps parents and teachers can take to protect their students' mental and physical health and academic studies when it's not a part of the school curriculum?

Free to Be wants kids to responsibly use life online. The program stresses confidence, character, positive decisions and refusal strategies with that in mind.

Leslie: The Executive Director

Following fires, the pandemic, and evolving technology, many organizations and individuals began reassessing their priorities. Free to Be and its beloved executive director were among them.

Jenean Thom, executive director since 2017, expressed an interest in becoming the nonprofit's program director. At the same time, Leslie's young kids were entering school. In anticipation of that, she spent the previous year interviewing women who worked in industries she found interesting to find a career she could be passionate about. She says, "So, I decided I wanted to do heart work, but I didn't know what it looked like."

Meanwhile, Free to Be's Board of Directors invited Leslie to help them figure out how to have the most significant impact in the future. She helped them redefine their mission, and soon, the search was on for a new executive director.

Leslie didn't see herself in that position at all. She says, "I'm not a public speaker, and I'm not really a fundraiser. I'm more of a conceptual person." So, she enthusiastically sent the job listing to friends and former colleagues whose skill sets she thought would be a good match.

Then, someone said, "Leslie, why don't you throw your hat in the ring?" What could it hurt? At least, it would be a chance to hone her interviewing skills. Sure, she was passionate about Free to Be. But, when she began envisioning herself as the executive director, she saw how much she cared about its mission and wanted to lead efforts to help teens and their families. So, she formally applied. After a thorough search, the Board of Directors (sans Sue, who recused herself from the process given that Leslie is her daughter) hired her to be the Executive Director of the 501c3 nonprofit.





Last April, Free to Be hosted a Relaunch event at Paradise Ridge Winery. It provided an opportunity to motivate and inform parents, educators, and supporters about their changes. The growth since is phenomenal! By November 2023, the organization reached 320% more students than the previous year. The programs have been primarily for kids in Santa Rosa schools. In January 2024 alone, more than 1,000 students participated in one of their programs, and more schools are asking for their services moving forward from Cloverdale to Petaluma.

Support from the community has been strong, too. The Free to Be Board of Directors include:

Brian Reed, president and CEO of Summit State Bank

Sue Bisbee, Founder of Free to Be

Janelle Baker, Tranformational Coach

Sandy Bader, Former Teacher at Cardinal Newman High School

Courtney Comer, Former Director of Development at UCSD Health Sciences

Katherine Gallagher, Executive Director at Gostrategic

Erika Copenhaver, Attorney

Gordon Dow, Retired Dow Pharmaceutical Sciences Founder

Many local businesses are also sponsors. Free to Be has achieved this growth with three staff positions, including Leslie, Jenean and Aaryn Haworth Lewis, a handful of curriculum educators who work on a contract basis, and a growing number of Teen Innovators.

Cate: A Teen Innovator

Cate is Sue's granddaughter and



Leslie's niece, who loves public speaking. Cate is one of the Teen Innovators in the Free to Be teen leadership program. She remembers when she first became interested in it, "My grandmother and aunt gave me some information and asked if I would like to speak about it or become involved. We stopped talking about it, and I remember bugging them every time we had a family dinner. I was hooked!"

Cate and the other teen leaders came up with the title "Teen Innovators." She says, "We talk a lot about what we're going to teach. Like, we've shifted more to mental health and relationships, like friendships, not just in general and bullying, but more like online and confidence. Confidence is huge! [We] speak to the kids and share our own personal stories that go with the curriculum, so that kids can see the connection."

Before getting in front of a classroom and throughout their term, Teen Innovators participate in a leadership training program. They select their real-life personal stories based on alignment with the curriculum taught by the trained educators. Then, they prepare an outline and work with the curriculum educators to craft their stories.

The Free to Be curriculum focuses on proven, character-based topics over four weeks. The topics are:

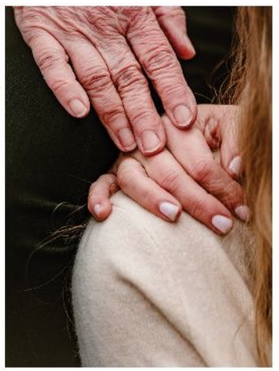
- Healthy Relationships
- Emotional Health
- Life Online
- Positive Choices

Sue says, "What really drives all of us is how important the information is and the feedback we get when we go into the classroom. I mean, the youth thank us for coming. They report a better understanding of these issues and learn how to navigate them. It's needed."

In their book, "Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier," Harvard professor Arthur Brooks and celebrity and businesswoman Oprah Winfrey discuss how to identify and experience the full range of emotions, then take a step to manage your response to those feelings rather than being defined by







them. They sum it up with the statement, "Feel the feel, then take the wheel." Free to Be gives kids the tools to do that. What better purpose for Sue, Leslie, and Cate than leading efforts teaching kids to build confidence in themselves and healthy relationships with others?