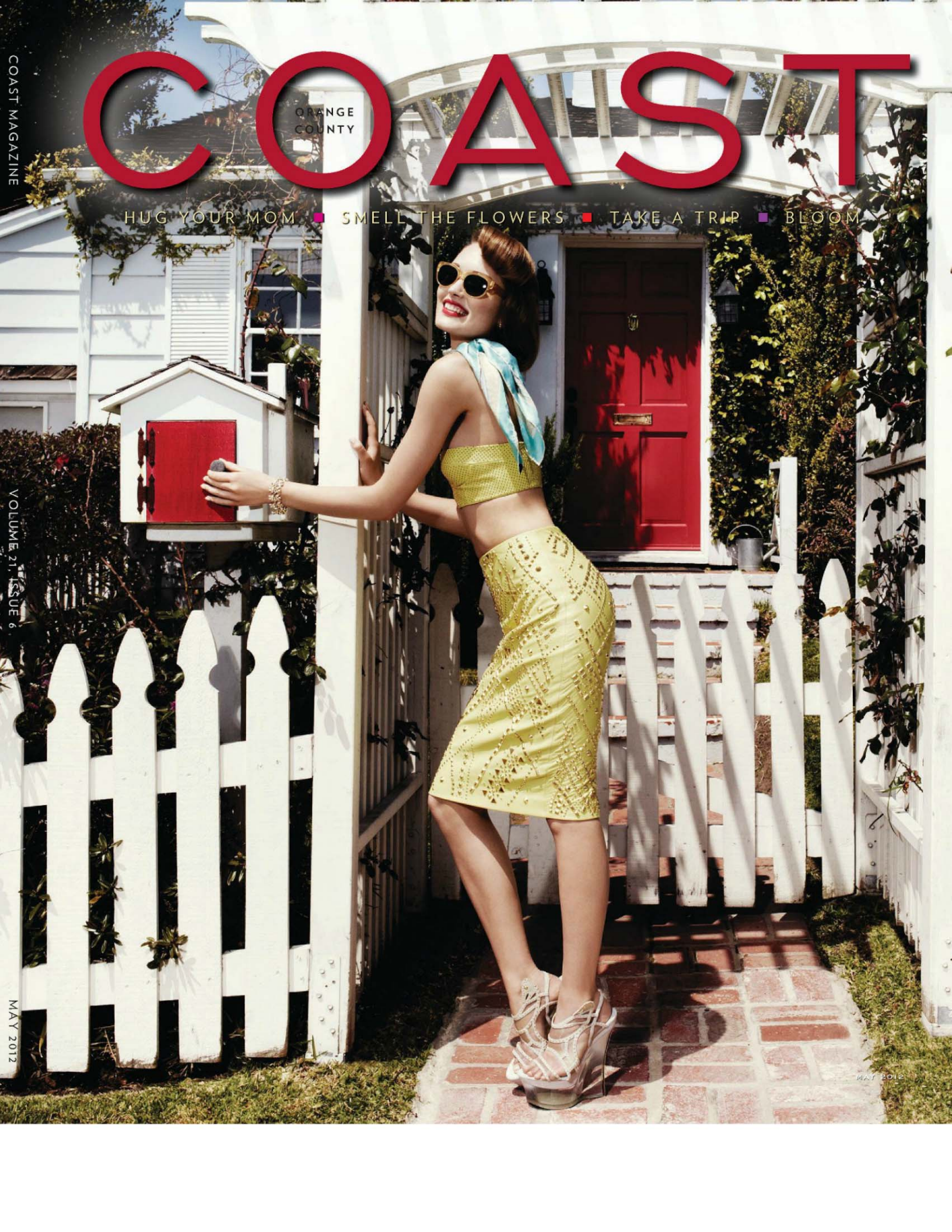


COAST

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Students in dance class at Santa Ana's The Wooden Floor

LESSONS FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

The challenges faced in educating our kids in California at times seem too complex and daunting to deal with, as academics, politicians and policy makers vie to distribute ever-decreasing funds to teach a diverse and changing population.

Some of Orange County's most successful and intelligent people confront the challenges with thoughtful philanthropy by giving to nonprofit programs that attempt to address the issues facing all students, especially the disadvantaged.

Some are ambitious, addressing issues on a broad scale. Santa Ana-based THINK Together, for example, is one of the largest nonprofit providers of extended learning time programs (early literacy, after-school, small group tutoring, summer learning, etc.) in the country, serving 100,000 students at more than 400 California locations across 30 school districts and more than 30 cities.

Other nonprofits use an innovative method to motivate and teach a few hundred kids at a time, like the dance, family service and academic programs at The Wooden Floor, which serves 375 students. Since 2005, the nonprofit (also based in Santa Ana) has seen a remarkable 100% of its students graduate high school and advance to higher education, some three times the national average than their socio-economic peers. And the MIND Research Institute focuses on math education, utilizing non-language based, visual instructional software to revolutionize math education in America. With the U.S. ranked 35th out of 40 developed countries in student achievement in math, innovation is desperately needed.

This month a remarkable group of OC philanthropists will gather to support a single charter school, the El Sol Science and Arts Academy. The High Hopes Luncheon May 8 at the Hyatt Regency in Irvine will raise funds for the Santa Ana school, which was founded in 2001 with 110 students in kindergarten and first grade, and now has 680 students enrolled in preschool through eighth grade. Big names like Merage and Ueberroth support the school and the luncheon, which will honor Kelly Thornton Smith, founder of the Center for Living Peace, and Dr. Margarita Pereyda, the chief medical officer of Share Our Selves.

The supporters are coming out because what El Sol Academy does is working for its students. El Sol's Academic Performance Index (API) score climbed from 559 in 2003 to 868 in 2010, exceeding district and state averages and El Sol's own target growth scores. The API measures academic performance, based on statewide testing, on a scale of 200 to 1,000, with 800 considered proficient. The school's most recent score rose again to 880.

El Sol serves a largely immigrant community and uses a unique dual-immersion curriculum that teaches students to read, write and speak in English and Spanish. It also has an after school/extended day program with additional instruction and volunteer tutoring, as well as extra music, dance, sports, and math activities – including the programs developed by the MIND Institute.

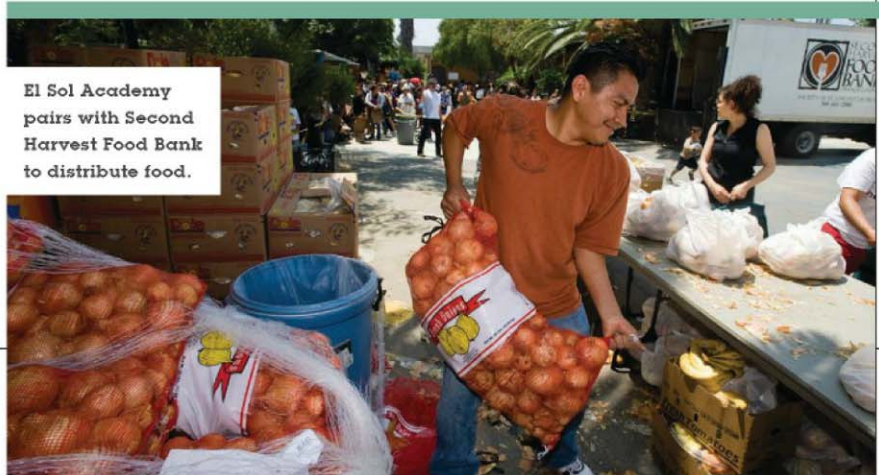
Other OC organizations also lend a helping hand, including Share Our Selves and UCI, which collaborate on the SOS-El Sol Wellness Center, a free onsite clinic that provides health screenings and other care free of charge. The U.S. Health Resources and Service Administration recently provided a \$1.5 million grant to expand the program. And the Second Harvest Food Bank comes to the school regularly to distribute food to students and their families.

With Orange County schools facing huge budget cuts (as much as \$368,209,000 in a recent state budget), and funding in California dropping on a per student basis from \$8,464 in 2007-08 to \$7,358 in 2011-12, it's clear individuals, foundations and community groups will need to do more to address the crisis in education.

Santa Ana, with all its challenges, is serving as a sort of incubator for developing innovative educational strategies with now proven accomplishments. With each graduate comes hope for the future, and with each family served life does improve, despite the odds. –KEDRIC FRANCIS

■ **GET TICKETS** :: For tickets to the El Sol Academy High Hopes Luncheon, send an e-mail to rsvp@meragefoundations.com. To learn more about and support the other educational programs mentioned, please visit their websites.

- :: thinktogether.org
- :: mindresearch.net
- :: thewoodenfloor.org
- :: elsolacademy.net



El Sol Academy pairs with Second Harvest Food Bank to distribute food.