

Fire relief-donation group Altadena Girls finds a long-term space for community aid



Image: Courtesy of Altadena Girls

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COURTESY OF ALTADENA GIRLS



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Days into the [Eaton Fire cutting through Altadena](#) outside Los Angeles, Avery Colvert started a donation drive to bring everyday supplies to girls affected by the wildfires. Less than two months later, her newly formed group – Altadena Girls – has found community support, major celebrity endorsements and a future with a long-term office space.

Displaced from their home by the Eaton fire in mid-January, 14-year-old Colvert and her family moved into her stepfather Matt Chait's creative studio. For a week, the family – including Colvert's mom, Lauren Sandidge; her brother; a cat and two hamsters – stayed in the studio, watching devastation rip through their community. The homes of many of the siblings' friends, as well as their middle school, were also destroyed in the blaze.

Like most Angelenos, Colvert kept up with donation drives and shelters via social media. But she noticed that, among the calls for clothes and bare necessities, something was missing.

“When you're a teenager, you're still building your identity. You don't know yourself yet. You're still growing up.” Colvert told L.A. Business First. “I envisioned my own bedroom, and I thought about all the things I have that make me ‘me,’ like my makeup and clothes and all of that stuff, and I literally could not imagine losing that. It would be really devastating.”



Avery Colvert founded Altadena Girls in response to the Eaton Fire in January outside Los Angeles.

TONY VALENTINO

The eighth-grader started brainstorming ways to collect more specialized donations for girls, including clothes, makeup, hair products, decor and bags.

With the help of Chait, Colvert set up an Instagram for her donation center, Altadena Girls.

The page took off overnight. Neighbors and strangers alike flooded the studio with makeup, jeans, jackets, shoes, skin care, blow dryers and more – almost all brand new, Chait said.

“We must’ve gotten a thousand-plus pairs of shoes,” Chait told L.A. Business First on a call with Colvert and Sandidge. “At this point, we have given away hundreds and hundreds of backpacks and suitcases and luggage. We’ve given

away truckloads of hair dryers, hair straighteners. If everything we had given away was here at the same time, we would need a Costco.”

Altadena Girls also received deliveries from national brands en masse that brought in pallets of products straight from manufacturers, Sandidge said.

Volunteers also showed up in hoards, ready to collect and organize the inventory. When girls affected by the wildfires came to “shop” for free, volunteers helped pack donated bags and suitcases for them, “as if they were just on their way to vacation,” Chait said.

The luggage, donated by brands like Away, “provided the most dignity to the people that we were helping,” he added.

Celebrity endorsements accompany community response

The family was shocked by the unexpected response to Colvert's Instagram.

Colvert recalled that, within the first day of launching the social-media page, she received a call from friends at a makeshift donation space, who told her trucks and cars were lined up and down a nearby street to bring supplies.

Even more shocking than the community impact was the bombardment of celebrity support. Altadena Girls patrons include Meghan Markle, Demi Lovato, Ariana Grande, Kerry Washington, Nicole Richie, Max Greenfield and Gov. Gavin Newsom’s partner Jennifer Newsom, who have donated money as well as boxes of brand-new products from their makeup or clothing lines.

Not only did many of them visit in person, Sandidge said, but they stayed to volunteer and organize supplies with the girls hands-on.

Paris Hilton has become a big fan of Altadena Girls – not only with merchandise and fiscal support, but with continued support of the initiative.

Hilton surprised Colvert with tickets to fire-relief concert FireAid last month, and in early February, she took Colvert with her to the Grammy Awards.

Colvert said she was amazed by the amount of support – even on social media, as celebrities shared Altadena Girls’ Instagram with their millions of followers.

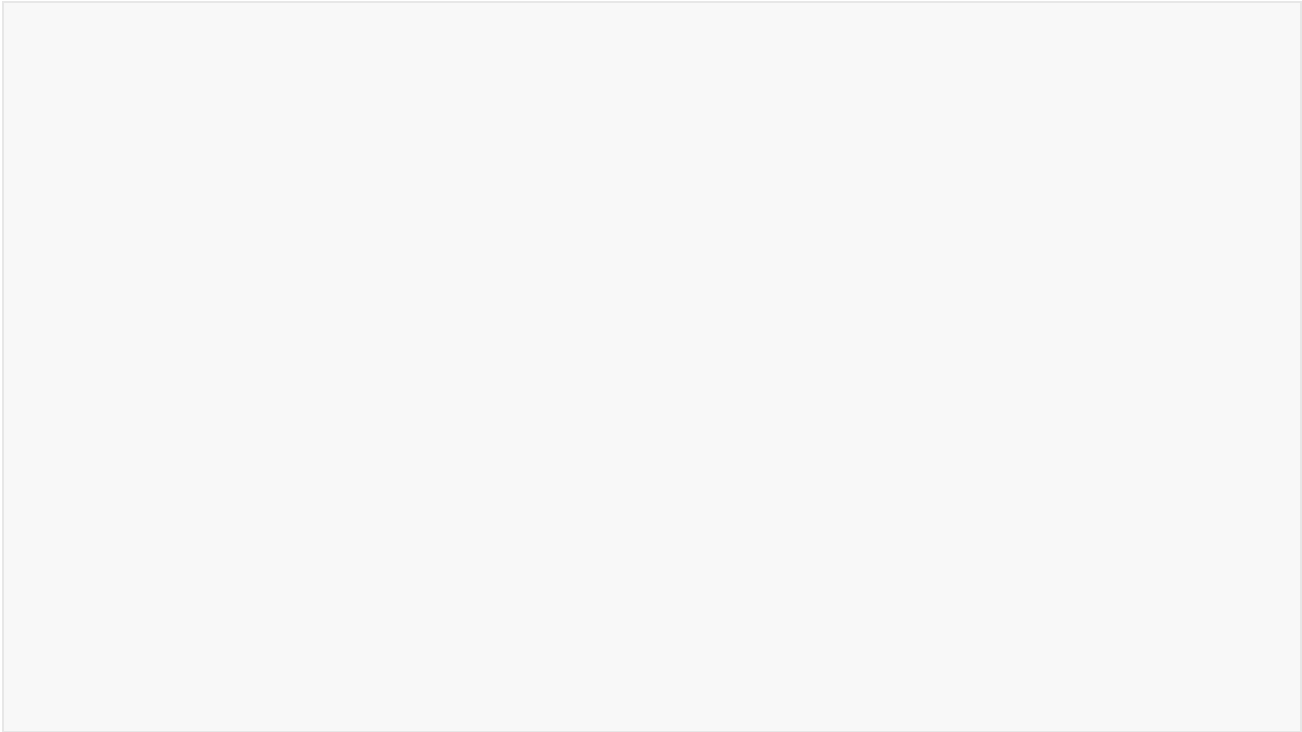
Real estate brokers step in to lock down long-term space

As of mid-February, Altadena Girls has paused accepting donations, as Colvert and her team pivot their focus to the next phase of the Altadena Girls project: building a community center for displaced girls.

The group started out by operating out of a donated warehouse in Pasadena. Altadena Girls then put out a call for real estate help, seeking a space in the Pasadena area where girls could come after school as a community space and “shopping” center, though all products remain free for those in need.

When JLL’s Claira Moran saw Altadena Girls on Instagram, she packed her car with donations to drive down to the warehouse. A few days later, she saw the call for real estate aid by Altadena Girls, and realized she could help in a larger way.

Moran connected the Altadena Girls team with JLL Vice President Hunter Brown, a broker very familiar with Pasadena. He took Altadena Girls’ parameters for a long-term space – a safe, centralized location, with space for more than just donations – and, within hours, had assembled a number of tours for Colvert and her team.



The group operates as a nonprofit, using donations to not only pay rent but also to renovate a 12,000-square-foot property into a clubhouse for girls in the community affected by the wildfires.

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Five days later, they'd closed a lease for a new space in Old Town Pasadena.

"Everybody that was involved in this in some way, shape or form stepped up, which is one of the few good things that come when a natural disaster happens," Brown told L.A. Business First. "The city of Pasadena has been great. They have a lot on their plate right now, but we've reached out to them with a few facets of the business to see how they can help out, from parking to security."

Colvert is the youngest client Brown has worked with, and he said the deal is the fastest he's seen close. Formerly a bank that's been converted to retail and office space, the property Altadena Girls landed on – at 225 E. Colorado Blvd. – became the nonprofit's main location, using philanthropic donations from the community and celebrity donors to pay the rent, Brown said.

The group operates as a nonprofit, using donations to not only pay rent but also renovate the 12,000-square-foot property into a clubhouse for girls in the community affected by the fires. After the two-story space is built out, Hilton has committed to designing a “Sliving” lounge downstairs, as she did for the Los Angeles LGBT Center. Alo Yoga will also design and donate supplies for a yoga room in the building.

“I want it to be super duper beautiful,” Colvert said. “Even with the gross brown bank walls, the volunteers come here and don't want to leave, and they'll come back tomorrow. We're not even up and running, and it just has good energy. It's gonna be incredible and be powered by youth, so it's gonna speak directly to the teenagers and the girls and what they want.”

Sandidge added the building in the heart of Pasadena “sends a message to these young girls that you're worthy of a beautiful space in a safe area, and you can feel good about coming in here.”

Fire relief efforts build momentum for nonprofit's future

Moran, who connected Altadena Girls with Brown, said she sees the transaction as a reminder of the “energy and momentum” during relief efforts.

“When there's disaster, we have all of this momentum and exposure, and I think it's about making it last and making it sustainable,” she said. “I think that we will see so much more of this in the next year, as a movement and an effort that happens for years to come.”

Colvert has a similar outlook on the situation. Through mobilizing Altadena Girls, she's seen the devastation first-hand, meeting fire victims every day who come into the space trying to rebuild bedrooms and wardrobes. When the weight of the situation bore down on her, she said she kept her head up by focusing on the positivity of those volunteering around her.

“In a time where there's such devastation, I was really trying to focus on positive,” she said. “A lot of people ask me how I’m feeling, how I stay motivated. Someone gave me this example when I was like a kid, and I think of it a lot – how horses have blinders so they don't get distracted. I took all the negative things and I put my blinders on and I pushed it aside, and I looked forward. I think if anybody wasn't positive every single day, we wouldn't have gotten to where we are.”

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