



GAME CHANGERS

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olf is all about numbers: Yardages. Score. Handicap. Slope. Rating.

Loft. Heck, even our post-round relaxation spot has a numeral attached to it. But putting a figure on the number of people who help, inspire, influence or positively impact the game is impossible to quantify. But we write; therefore we try. We call it the Front 9 – an annual look at a few people in the Southland making a difference through their caring, compassionate or creative natures. But there are more. So many more that we're highlighting a few extra people than the norm this year. Yes, it's fuzzy math. But who's counting?



TEAL GUION

The program director at The First Tee of Orange County has a passion and energy level that is second to none.

BY MICHAEL LEDNOVICH

Teal Guion's career ambitions were crystal clear: become director of golf at a prestigious club in the Palm Spring area.

But as she worked her way up the rungs of the golf management ladder she discovered that the ladder was leaning against the wrong wall.

"I just wasn't as happy as I should have been in the profession," Guion said. "Then my mom told me about an opportunity of launching the First Tee program in the Coachella Valley. My life hasn't been the same since."

That was eight years – and two launches – ago. Guion, now program director of The First Tee of Orange County, was also involved in the beginning of that chapter's start two years ago at The Islands Golf Center in Anaheim.

"When I first became involved in the First Tee I found that it was much more than about golf," she said of the attraction. "The First Tee is really about life values and helping these kids become the best people they can be."

Guion was raised on golf by a dad who gave her and her brother the middle names of Palmer and Nicklaus, respectively. As a teen, there wasn't a girl's golf team at Palm Springs High School so Guion played on the boy's team.

"It was awkward at first," she recalled, "but when they saw I could play I became one of them."

Guion, who also played golf at BYU and Long Beach State, has an effusive personality that's evident to First Tee students, coaches and volunteers. But she also connects on a deeper level with program youngsters when teaching them the First Tee's nine core values of honesty, integrity,



TEAL GUION ENJOYS HELPING YOUNG FIRST TEE DEVELOPEES SUCH AS ISRAEL SILVA AND MAURICIO BORGES.

sportsmanship, respect, confidence, responsibility, perseverance, courtesy and judgment.

"I once told them the story about how I stole a book from a store and my mom caught me lying about it. She marched me right back to the store where I had to tell the store manager what I had done," Guion said. "You could see the kids' jaws dropping. They couldn't believe an adult would actually admit to mistakes and failures. What we're trying to teach the kids is that life is not always a bed of roses. We're giving them the tools for the rest of their lives that will help them navigate life's ups and downs."

For the most part, Guion views life's challenges as opportunities, not obstacles.

"Kids really do need role models, but they need to see their role models as real human beings who deal with everyday life just like the rest of us," Guion said. "I believe a mistake is an

opportunity to learn."

Just as she has grown by helping launch and build two First Tee programs in the Southland, the organization as a whole has evolved along with her.

"I've learned not to rush things," Guion said. "The program is so rich and robust that it takes time for it to sink in with our youngsters. The First Tee has also done a tremendous job in improving the program curriculum and lesson plans. We've added a healthy eating component along with sports psychology. We've got a complete package now."

Finding a robust roster of assistance also hasn't been a problem the first two years in Orange County.

"Our volunteers and coaches give their time and heart and soul to us," Guion said. "The volunteers are our personal connection to the kids. We couldn't do this without them, and they see the big picture of building kids into values-driven adults." **SC**