MENTOR HELPING TO GUIDE THE WAY

By C. Jackson Cowart  5:05 a.m. June 19, 2015

Starlings volleyball

What: 18th annual Starlings National Championships, featuring more than 100 teams from across the nation competing in four age divisions.

Who: Started in 1996 in San Diego by former U.S. national team member Byron Shewman, the Starlings offer club volleyball opportunities to girls (ages 10-18) regardless of their socioeconomic background. It is the largest junior volleyball club in the nation.

When: Today through Sunday.

Where: Alliant University, San Diego City College’s Harry West Gym.

Online: starlings.org

Irene Mello doesn’t see herself as the hero. She doesn’t seek praise or attention.

The San Diego High girls volleyball coach is solely focused on her love of the game, yet she’ll stop at nothing to create positive change in others’ lives.
This weekend, more than 100 volleyball clubs will compete in the 18th annual Starlings National Championships, with teams playing at Alliant University and San Diego City College — where Mello serves in an administrative role.

“She’s been with us since the beginning and helps us get that gym,” said Byron Shewman, founder of Starlings Volleyball Clubs. “It’s kind of a thankless job.”

But for Mello — who coached with the Starlings for years and now serves as director of the San Diego City Starlings team — the struggles to secure facilities or maintain funding are always worth the battle.

“You just kind of roll with the punches,” she said. “If you believe in what the mission statement is about, it should be no problem.”

When Shewman founded the first Starlings club in San Diego, his mission was to provide an opportunity for young girls to play volleyball regardless of socioeconomic status.

Nearly two decades later, the organization has become a sanctuary for inner-city youth to participate in club volleyball, even as most club prices continue to rise.

“I never had that opportunity to play club. The cost per month was outrageous,” said Mello, who competed in volleyball at City College. “If this wasn’t here, a lot of girls would not be able to play this sport.”

Without Starlings, Mello knows she would not have been able to afford club volleyball for her two nieces — whom she raised from a broken home and placed into the sport to help steady their lives.

“Starlings was kind of a steppingstone for (them) to go on to college and be successful,” Mello said. “The kids that embrace Starlings really get a lot out of it.”

This was certainly true for San Diego City Starlings coach Rachelle DaCosta. A Starlings player from 2005-2008, DaCosta struggled with debilitating injuries and ailments throughout her childhood.

But volleyball was her stabilizing force, propelling DaCosta through tough times with a smile on her face.

“She said, ‘If it wasn’t for volleyball, I don’t think I would have made it through high school,’ ” Mello said. “Just hearing her say that, ‘Coach, if it wasn’t for volleyball …’ it’s like, ‘wow.’

“That’s what keeps me going.”

Nineteen years later, Mello no longer coaches a Starlings team and doesn’t expect to coach at San Diego High much longer. But as the team prepares for the national championships this weekend, Mello remains devoted to her girls.

“I don’t think it’s a struggle to keep doing it,” Mello said. “I believe in what it’s about and I believe that it helps kids.

“There’s more to it than just volleyball.”
Cowart is a Union-Tribune intern.