Anna Oroumian faces a tough crowd – 100 high school students, many of whom have seen gang warfare, domestic violence, racism, drug abuse. But they haven’t seen Oroumian. She tells of her life in Beirut, in a bullet-riddled orphanage. She figures she was three the first time she saw someone get killed on the street.

“Did this little girl cry?” Oroumian asks, recalling her difficult childhood. “Yes, she cried a lot.” Ivan Barba, 17, sits spellbound, listening. “I thought I had it hard,” he says, “but she made me realize I should be grateful for what I have.”

That is exactly the kind of epiphany Oroumian, 29, aims to provoke. Then comes her real point: despite the travails, she thrived—and so can you, kids. At age 17 she arrived alone in the United States. Five years later she received the Outstanding Senior Award at U.C.L.A.; she aims to get a Harvard M.B.A. and pursue a career in business.

A compact Gloria Estefan lookalike, Oroumian runs the tiny nonprofit Academy of Business Leadership (ABL). During a seven-week summer session, kids write 50-page business plans for their dream companies. Recent pitches: a 17th-century-themed bed-and-breakfast, a drive-through espresso café and an auto-parts outfit for teenagers with souped-up cars.

Students must support their plans with real-world data—office rent, wages, taxes, insurance. They visit Los Angeles companies and hear from executives. They run imaginary $100,000 stock portfolios. Some get mentors and internships.

ABL was formed in 1992 by Rick Yamamoto, and executive at Southern California Edison. In 1998 Oroumian was hired to re-energize the organization. She has tripled annual fund-raising and student enrollment, which is now over 300.

Anna Laguna, 19, is the first member of her family to attend college. “At ABL, I realized how much opportunity lies in the world for any one willing to take advantage of it,” she says. “More importantly, I realized that I had to invest in myself.”

Never be ashamed of where you come from, Oroumian preaches. “I didn’t choose where I came from but I definitely chose where I am today.”

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