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Life

## WASHTENAW COUNTY: Women Who Care helps Girls Group of Ann Arbor expand

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A donation of \$8,900 from one Washtenaw County nonprofit will help a second nonprofit expand services for middle and high school girls whose ambition is to be the first in their families to go to college.

The membership of 100+ Women Who Care, an Ann Arbor-based organization started in fall 2011, meets twice a year to vote on a nonprofit to support, and each woman donates \$100 per session, or \$200 per year. With the membership standing at 89 women as of October 2012, the most recent donation, to Girls Group of Ann Arbor, totaled \$8,900.

Debi Zahn, who co-founded 100+ Women Who Care of Washtenaw County, had heard about a woman who started a 100 Women Who Care group in Jackson and found that her friend, Marge Farrand, had also heard of the nonprofit.

"We put our heads together and said, 'Gosh, why don't we start one in Washtenaw County?' There wasn't much we needed to do except find women who were passionate about giving to local charities."

The first donation occurred in October 2011, and with a membership of 38 women, the group was able to donate \$3,800 to Ele's Place, an Ann Arbor organization that helps grieving children. In April 2012, the group had grown to 57 women, and \$5,700 went to Hope Clinic of Ypsilanti.

"We get together twice a year for a one-hour meeting," Zahn said. "Women write their name down and put it in a basket if they're interested in being chosen to present about the charity they're suggesting. We pick three names, and those three women have five minutes to present about their charity."

After hearing the pitches, each woman votes, and when the votes are counted, the charity that received the most votes gets all donations for that meeting.

"Every woman agrees that whether her charity is chosen or not, her check will be written to the charity that garnered the most votes," Zahn said. "It's really easy and such a fabulous way to give back to the community locally."

In October 2012, the charity that won the most votes was Girls Group, started about nine years ago by Executive Director Sue Schooner. The organization's mission is to help girls in middle and high school - particularly ones who come from families without a history of college attendance - achieve economic independence through encouraging them to graduate high school and go on to college.

That goal is achieved through one-on-one mentoring, homework help, summer camps and enrichment activities.

Schooner founded Girls Group based on volunteer experiences with girls while she was still making a living as an executive in the automotive industry.

"I was doing community service and met these young girls, and they basically changed my life," Schooner said.

She was still working her day job during the week, and then spending the entire weekend volunteering with middle school girls, funding all the activities herself.

"The very first day at Girls Group, we had what we called a 'magic box' where the girls could anonymously throw a question in a box," Schooner said.

"The first question was: Why do men rape young girls instead of raping grown women? Thank God I was sitting with a social worker, and I asked her how to fix this. The social worker said that the most important thing was to provide a safe environment to talk about their problems. So, we sat there for two hours talking about rape, how to be safe, who to talk to if you're raped. That was the beginning of my education."

Those discussion groups continue to be an important part of Girls Group.

"Every Friday for the last nine years, we've talked about boys, parents, sexual health - everything," Schooner said.

Those talks are an important part of Girls Group's programming, because succeeding is about more than just getting good grades. Girls Group mentors help the girls overcome any social or personal issue that could get in the way of their success.

The group has grown a great deal in the past nine years. About seven years ago, when the organization's scope had grown, Schooner retired from the automotive industry and now directs Girls Group full time.

"It started as a middle school program because I met these young women while they were in middle school, but they never left, so it became a high school program," Schooner said.

At first, the program mainly concentrated on mentoring and homework help, but Schooner said Girls Group now provides "wraparound programming" on topics from dealing with anger to social capital to spiritual and health issues - helping the girls with any issue that might prevent them from succeeding.

The girls also learn about giving back through donating their time to area nonprofits, including helping out with the book sale of the local chapter of the American Association of University Women.

"A lot of books have to be carried, so the kids come in and do the carrying," Schooner said. "Our kids love books, and at the end of the sale, they can take books they like that haven't sold. And the AAUW ladies are so nice, hugging the girls and telling them how great they are."

After expanding to the high school level, the Girls Group program grew to include a college component, as well.

"I believed these girls had more potential than their parents and schools thought they did, so I developed a college prep component, and it's pretty intense," Schooner said. "We take the girls on college tours, including a tour of historically black colleges. We'll drive them to their ACT test, help them with college essays and scholarship applications. We even help them move into the dorm."

Schooner said many of the girls have never been on a plane or been to a summer camp, and allowing them to have those experiences gives the girls a chance to "reinvent themselves" and get a new perspective.

"And now we have 37 girls in college who never even knew anyone who'd been to college," Schooner said.

One of those girls in college is Alexia Burton of Ann Arbor, now a junior at Tuskegee University in Alabama.

She said when she moved to Ann Arbor, neighborhood kids mentioned Girls Group and said she should come. Burton started attending the group and said she received "a lot of academic help."

"I was not really good in math, so there was a high school math tutor I would go to. And they did a lot of college prep. I think they started with ACT test prep in 11th grade."

She said the group helped her in other ways, through the Friday discussions, as well as cultural enrichment programs.

"The weekly discussions on Friday help the girls with topics like relationships or parents," she said.

"Also, I really enjoyed the activities we would do. One of the best things was they introduced me to yoga, and I want to become a yoga instructor in the future. We'd do a lot of different things. We'd go to ballets, and one time we went to the Nutcracker. I really enjoyed those kinds of things."

Burton is typical of the girls in the group in that neither of her parents went on to college after high school, though her grandmother has an associate's degree.

"Before Girls Group, I didn't think very much about college," she said. "I liked being part of Girls Group. A lot of the mentors were African American and went to the University of Michigan. I thought, 'Wow, if they can go to college, maybe I can do the same.'"

Burton has not only received benefits from Girls Group, but is already giving back to other girls. She has volunteered with Girls Group during two summer breaks and has also shared her experiences with Girls Group participants who visit her college as part of the Girls Group tour of historically black colleges and universities.

She'll continue to give back to girls and others after her undergraduate and graduate education, when she hopes to become a school social worker or a case worker.

For more information about 100+ Women Who Care - Washtenaw County, [visit their Facebook page](#). To learn more about **Girls Group**, [visit online](#).

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