

Crazy Wisdom Kids in the Community

By Nieka Apell



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Girls Group

For many Ann Arbor-area teenage girls, completing high school and going on to receive a college education is an expectation. Others, however — even bright young women with great potential — may not know anyone who has gone on to college and may have a hard time envisioning it as a possibility for themselves. A local nonprofit called Girls Group has a goal of identifying “young women with the potential to be first-generation college students,” according to the organization’s executive director, Sue Schooner. She said that an important part of the Girls Group mission is to guide young women on a path to becoming “emotionally and economically self-sufficient.” The organization does this through a wide range of programs, workshops, and mentorships.

A former Chrysler executive, Schooner was volunteering for The Women’s Center of Southeastern Michigan when she became acquainted with a group of girls who lived in the Pinelake Village Cooperative in Ann Arbor. As she spent more time with these girls, Schooner realized their potential for success in higher education, despite the life challenges they faced. At age 47, Schooner chose to retire from her employment in the auto industry, and in 2003 she founded Girls Group. She initially funded the organization herself, but nine years ago she took the steps needed for it to become a registered nonprofit. Girls Group now operates on private donations and on grants from organizations such as the Knights of Columbus, Mardi Gras Foundation, MGM, Kiwanis, and many others, and on donations of meeting space from local organizations such as Peace Neighborhood Center, Hikone Community Center, and the University of Michigan. “We have incredibly low overhead for an organization like ours since we have no building of our own,” Schooner said, “We rely on the generosity of others.”

Girls Group works with teachers, counselors, and other nonprofits to identify middle and high-school girls in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti who have a desire to complete high school and go on to college. Schooner said that this year there are 15 middle-school and 40 high-school students involved with Girls Group. And the success enjoyed by Girls Group members is noteworthy: the group has a 100 percent high-school graduation rate, and 37 of its members are currently enrolled at colleges and universities including Michigan State, Wayne State, Ferris State, Eastern Michigan University, Washtenaw Community College, DePaul University (Chicago), and Tuskegee University (Tuskegee, Alabama).

The achievements of Girls Group participants can be attributed to the depth and variety of experiences the organization offers, all aimed at developing “confident young women who know that they have a voice, an opinion, and know how to use these to succeed in college and in the workplace,” said Schooner. Participants gather weekly for discussion groups on a wide range of topics including careers, politics, HIV/AIDS, relationships with parents and significant others, and other issues in their lives. ““When I come to Girls Group, I don’t feel invisible anymore,”” Schooner quoted one participant as saying. “Most Girls Group participants have

backgrounds which include one or more traumas — homelessness, poverty, abuse, rape, and/or neglect,” Schooner noted.

Because Girls Group is not affiliated with any particular religion, participants are able to talk about a wide range of issues, Schooner said. “Our goal is to help these girls to develop open minds,” she said. “Our girls are mostly Christian or Muslim, but we have people come talk with them about being Jewish, about being Muslim, about being American Indian, about being gay. We want to create an open-minded group. These young women want to be treated that way, and to achieve that, we all need to keep it real and we all need to be open-minded,” Schooner said.



Stephaney Moses, accepting the Hometown Health Hero Award , on behalf of Girls Group, at the State Capitol in Lansing, for Public Health Week.

Another important aim of the Girls Group program is teaching anger management strategies to participants. “They are often angry because they are disenfranchised,” Schooner said. “These girls really do have a lot of stress and frustration in their lives. They are so close to being angry, and then when something happens at home or at school, that anger accelerates and they just want to explode. We want

to teach them how to cut that anger before it gets in the way of doing what they need to do to be successful,” explained Schooner.

To help the girls learn to manage their emotions, Schooner brings in volunteers to teach them a variety of strategies for relaxation, anger management, and stress relief, including yoga, healthy eating, meditation, and Zumba. “Some girls may find that yoga’s not their thing, but others may like it for stress relief,” she said. “Someone else may love art journaling or jogging. We try to teach them as many ways to self-soothe as we can by giving them a whole variety of tools. This is a skill that will get them through school, through college, through work, and through relationships. They need to find their own coping mechanisms.”

When life situations become too intense, each Girls Group member knows she can reach out to Schooner or to the other counselors who work with the group. Schooner said there are currently three paid staff members and four social work interns (there will be six beginning in January) who are available to talk with the girls or their mothers at any time. “Every girl and every mom has a cell phone number for me and for our counselors,” said Schooner. “They know they can call us at any time for any reason — a family problem, a boy problem, a school problem. They can always call a mentor and say they need help.”

In addition to having a mentor available in times of crisis, forming ongoing, meaningful relationships with successful adult mentors is an important part of Girls Group. “We want the girls to learn how to trust adults,” Schooner said. “They might work back and forth writing journals to each other or find other activities they both enjoy. This makes every girl feel special, to communicate this way with a mentor.”

Girls Group has a three-year relationship with the Junior League of Ann Arbor, and the girls continue to benefit from mentoring opportunities with the group. “At first, girls felt like those women were just so different from themselves,” said Schooner. “These people come in to talk to you and they look so different than you do and talk different from you, and you feel you have nothing in common. Then there are people who might look like you, but who are college graduates and are so successful. After a while, though, they connect at a heart level and

realize that they aren't entirely different, and that is life-changing."

Other activities are aimed at developing what Schooner calls "social capital" among the girls. Schooner told of a story she'd read recently in an autobiographical book about a young man who was asked to go into a grocery store to buy brie cheese and other foods with which he was unfamiliar. "He felt really stupid and angry," said Schooner. "That kind of situation happens to these girls all the time, and it's easy to get really, really angry. We try to put them in those situations so they are not uncomfortable when they encounter something new, and we help them think of ways to self-soothe when they do get angry." Girls Group staff and volunteers offer the girls "etiquette brunches" and take them to museums, concerts, plays, conferences, and events at upscale homes to have mix-and-mingle sessions at which they can talk to other kids and adults they may not know and with whom they may not have a lot in common. "This helps prepare them for reality," explained Schooner. "That's what life in college and the workplace is going to be like."

Many of the Girls Group programs are focused more specifically on helping the girls graduate from high school, evaluate higher education options, and begin college. Homework help is offered every Tuesday evening, and Girls Group staff and volunteers help the girls get to ACT preparation courses, college tours, and college preparation summer camps at schools across the country by finding funding for transportation or actually taking the girls themselves. "It can be so empowering being on a plane," said Schooner. "You're so used to focusing on all the drama in your little neighborhood or in your school or in your family, and then you're in a plane with all these strangers, and many of them look different than you do, and then you're on a college campus, and staying in a dorm — again, with people with very different experiences from you. The girls see all of that, and it's very motivating and empowering."

Schooner is proud that every one of the Girls Group participants who has graduated from high school has gone on to college. "We emphasize that while everyone goes on to college, there are a lot of valid options available. It's not just about going to a four-year school. We are much more intentional about it," explained Schooner,

adding that Girls Group mentors help the girls make matrices for evaluating college programs, dorms, and costs. "All this helps the girls feel as if they are making a good choice," she said. "There are a variety of great programs. The goal is to be economically and emotionally self-sufficient. We help them look at ways to do that other than a four-year degree, if that's the best choice for them right now." Schooner added that the relationship that Girls Group has developed at Washtenaw Community College and with WCC President Rose Bellanca has made that school an especially attractive option. "She is so charming and so welcoming. She recently spent two hours with our girls answering their questions and talking with them about their goals and dreams."

Schooner encourages anyone who knows a girl who might benefit from Girls Group to get in touch with her. She said that some people can't believe she can have girls from six different high schools — or from six different neighborhoods — getting along in a group together. "The group initially did exhibit some prejudices," said Schooner, "but now we've done so much work together — things like 'Trust Days,' when we do exercises that connect the girls at a different level. Now these girls are connected at the heart level. Now they are comfortable mixing no matter where they go to school, and they can carry that forward as they go on to college and to work and to all their other relationships in their lives."

For more information about Girls Group, contact: Sue Schooner, executive director, sue@girlsgroup.org; 2445 Newport Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48103; (734) 994-6627; www.girlsgroup.org