

Profile

Girls Group advocate Sue Schooner

Lisa Carolin, staff writer

Sue Schooner's upbringing, career path, and connection to Judaism may not be typical, but her life in Ann Arbor now is all the richer for it.

She has found her calling as the executive director of Girls Group, a local non-

"It was the most mind blowing, humbling two hours of my life," said Schooner, contrasting the experience with her background in business. "I realized I didn't know a damn thing!"

She says the majority of the girls in the program have a history of trauma. It's a holistic program that works with each girl's needs.

Girls Group is now in nearly ev-



Sue Schooner

profit organization she founded that helps young women get through middle school, high school, into college and beyond.

Now 57, she reflects on her path to getting where she is.

"I did not have a typical Jewish upbringing," recalls Schooner. "My dad was an officer in the Army." That meant she and her parents moved around the country frequently.

"I had to build credibility with teachers and make friends quickly," said Schooner. "It made me who I am today and is part of why Girls Group resonates with me."

Despite her upbringing not being "typically Jewish," Judaism has provided one of the few consistent parts of Schooner's life.

"Regardless of where I have lived, I've always been able to go to a conservative service and know every single song."

Schooner was good in math, which led to her career path in accounting—getting a bachelor of science degree from Ithaca College and an MBA from Harvard. She eventually did a summer internship for Chrysler and calls it, "the most exciting summer of my life." That led to many positions at Chrysler.

"I loved it there because Chrysler was a family," said Schooner. "People I met at Chrysler are still my best friends."

Her experience at Chrysler led to other good jobs, including a consulting firm that she started. Thirteen years ago she moved to Ann Arbor and started Girls Group, and after realizing that it was a full-time endeavor, she left the automotive industry a decade ago.

Schooner wanted to do volunteer work and met Rose Martin at the Peace Neighborhood Center. During an opportunity for girls to ask questions, one of them asked why men rape young girls.

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For Schooner, getting involved with Girls Group has been a revelation.

"I just wanted to hang out with some kids," she said. "I didn't expect this."

She says that no emotions were allowed in the way that she was brought up.

"I'm a three-time breast cancer survivor who never cried," she said. "A guy I dated told me I was the least empathetic person he knew. Girls Group has taught me to listen with an open heart and not to judge."

Schooner brings her business background to the program, which complements the approach the social workers who work for Girls Group take.

"We meet the girls in middle school and keep them through high school, then get them to be first generation college students, and we give them the tools to do it," said Schooner. "Once you get them to graduate, you create a paradigm shift because kids know other kids that are successful."

Girls Group is a huge part of her life, but she still makes time for other pursuits, including enjoying various Jewish traditions.

"As a kid I practiced traditions because I had to," she said. "Now I do so because I want to."

She cites lighting candles as something she particularly enjoys, especially Shabbat and Yahrzeit candles.

Schooner still has her father's shofar, which he got in Israel, and it is blown every new year by local food advocate and professor Oran Hesterman.

"I have many Jewish friends," she said. "There's a connection, I think, that is part of being Jewish. It's living on a cerebral level."

Schooner uses her ability to connect with people in all aspects of her life, and it has brought her to this point in time where she has touched so many people's lives. ■