

Girl Power

Retired auto executive helps girls reach their full potential.

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Ann Arbor

Susan Schooner's career has taken some nontraditional paths, but her childhood was also unusual. Her father was a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, and the family moved every year as he was transferred to various military bases. Six sets of dishes accompanied them in their moves because they kept kosher and her mother wanted separate dishes for everyday use and holidays, including Passover.

"We were very Conservative — going to services, Sunday school and Hebrew school wherever we were. Often we were the only Jewish family on the base," Schooner, 57, says.

Achievement and hard work were stressed with little attention to feelings and emotional support, Schooner recalls. She graduated from Ithaca College with an accounting degree and then earned an M.B.A. from Harvard. A summer internship at Chrysler, which she loved, led to a 10-year stint at Chrysler Financial.

Historically, Jews and women were rarely recruited in the auto industry, but there were two Jewish executives at Chrysler, including vice chairman Gerald Greenwald, so being Jewish wasn't an issue, Schooner says. In 1993, she left Chrysler to become chief financial officer at Textron Automotive.

Although Schooner enjoyed her automotive career, she gave it up in 2006 to work full time as the unpaid executive director of Girls Group, a nonprofit mentoring program she founded three years earlier in Ann Arbor, where she lives. The idea for Girls Group began with her earlier volunteer work at the Women's Center of Southeastern Michigan and at the Peace Neighborhood Center. Participating in mentoring workshops with middle-school girls, Schooner was deeply affected by the love and support the adults and girls expressed for each other.

GIRLS GAIN CONFIDENCE

Schooner combined two mentoring groups to create Girls Group in 2003, added field trips and expanding the program, funding it herself. She saw a need to help girls, many from low-income, African American families, to find their voices and realize their own power.

"People make assumptions about how smart they are and what they could do. They don't necessarily have parents who are supportive. Girls are more likely to have their self-image affected by others, and we want them to realize that they are special," Schooner explains.



Top: Starneka Johnson, Sue Schooner and Dea Chapell visited the Ann Arbor NPR station to tape a segment about Girls Group for the *Stateside* program.



Bottom: Students at Girls Group's Pioneer High School weekly in-school program.

A key goal is self-sufficiency so Girls Group focuses on academic improvement with college as a goal. Staff members help with applications, the transition to college and support toward graduation. "You have to start working toward college in middle school," Schooner says.

She is proud that 90 Girls Group participants have attended college, including 10 who have graduated. These are girls who no one expected to go to college, Schooner says. Achieving these results requires intensive academic workshops to teach study skills, time management and SAT preparation, as well as inspirational presentations by successful career women.

The 300 girls currently enrolled in Girls Group participate in group sessions as well as one-on-one mentoring. During the school year, weekly programs are held at three Ann Arbor high schools and five middle schools. Field trips, community service and college tours continue all year long. Participants are

recommended by the Ann Arbor schools and then interviewed by Girls Group staff. Parents are involved as well, and Girls Group works cooperatively with the participants' teachers and counselors.

Seven full-time staff members and 13 social work interns from Eastern Michigan University, University of Michigan and Wayne State University organize and provide services. Licensed social workers volunteer to help supervise the social work interns who serve as mentors, providing individual counseling as needed.

Whitney Hicks, a Wayne State University finance student who lives in Detroit, began attending the Girls Group afterschool program when she was a junior at Ann Arbor's Skyline High School. She found it useful as a way to relieve some after-school stress and gain self-confidence. "I had really bad acne and they tried to help uplift me. Sue helped me a lot on that," Hicks says.

She appreciated both the program's men-

tors and its creative exercises focusing on self-improvement. Hicks credits Girls Group with encouraging her to attend college when her father was skeptical about it and assisting with a scholarship. Her mentors have continued their connection with her during college, and she hopes to become more involved with Girls Group after graduation.

HANDS-ON HELP

Athena Johnson of Ann Arbor has three daughters who have participated in Girls Group, each starting during ninth grade.

"The mentors were beautiful. Girls need all of the support and help they can get. There was hands-on help from Sue and others to help us get through any good or bad situation," says Johnson.

She found the summer camp and participation in a tour of traditionally African American colleges to be especially useful. When her oldest daughter started college, Johnson says that Schooner helped her move into her college dorm.

Schooner's business acumen has kept Girls Group cost-effective and maintained its stability — which can be challenging for small nonprofits. Overhead is kept low by using donated office space and social work students as program mentors. Currently there are 12 funders, mostly individual donors, and the annual budget is \$700,000.

Patti Aaron, an experienced volunteer in Detroit's Jewish community, learned about Girls Group after moving to Ann Arbor. She was impressed with the organization and began donating about eight years ago.

"I have been involved with a number of organizations for 30 years, and this is truly a wonderful organization in terms of outcomes and impact," she says. "Sue is second to none in keeping the organization on mission, efficiently run, and engaging professionals from the community to give of their time and money."

"The girls are going to school and staying in school, getting messages that they weren't getting anywhere else — that they have value and deserve to pursue their dreams," Aaron says. She adds that Schooner's "heart and business background" are keys to the success of Girls Group.

Schooner says Girls Group has become "my passion, my life." She wants to keep expanding it and hopes to start in Ypsilanti by September 2017. "Girls Group has created community in my life," she says. ✱

Visit girlsgroup.org for more information.