

ARTICLE FULFILLING THEIR PROMISE

HOW RETIRED AUTOMOBILE EXECUTIVE SUSAN SCHOONER IS HELPING YOUNG WOMEN REACH THEIR POTENTIAL—AND HOW THAT WORK HAS HELPED HER FIND HERSELF

By Maureen Harmon, *Harvard Business School Alumni Stories*

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Photo by Debra Somerville



Photo courtesy of Susan Schooner

The founding of Girls Group began in 2003 with a single handwritten question pulled from a box.

A group of middle school girls had scribbled questions onto scraps of paper and dropped them into the box to prompt discussions. The young women were sitting with a group of new mentors, including Susan Schooner (MBA 1983) and a group of social work students who were all working at two nonprofits—the Women’s Center and the Peace Neighborhood Center—in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The questions: “Why do men rape young girls?” and “Why don’t they rape women their own age?”

“That was completely mind-blowing to me,” says Schooner, who was a board member for the Women’s Center at the time. She had the idea in her head that mentorship meant book discussions, journaling, hiking, talking about dating, and shooting the breeze—not questions that

would shake her to her core. She turned to the social work students and asked, “How are we going to fix this?” Their answer: “We’re not here to fix problems. We’re here to provide a safe environment to talk about problems.”

Schooner was floored. As a former high-ranking executive in the automobile industry, she was used to taking a problem and solving it. But the frank discussion about a very complicated and sensitive social issue with no easy answer was new to her. And to see the young girls who were affected by it was humbling.

“Up until then, I thought I was a smart person,” says Schooner, whose lengthy career was spent primarily at Chrysler and Textron. “I was well-educated, well-traveled, made a lot of money, had a good career, and [then I had] this realization that I really knew absolutely nothing that was meaningful.”

What Schooner saw in these young women was promise and a world that wasn’t affording them the same opportunities she had enjoyed growing up. So that same year, she took her own money and launched Girls Group, an organization designed to economically and emotionally support middle and high school girls in the area. The goal was to help them become first-generation college graduates and, perhaps more important, to believe that they had the ability and the smarts to get there.

What started as one woman hoping to mentor a few young women is now a staff of 11, with a dozen social work interns from Eastern Michigan University, Wayne State and the University of Michigan; both part-time and contract staff; numerous volunteers; and 16 board members who do a lot of hands-on work. Today, Girls Group facilitates 15 weekly

programs within the public schools. Schooner still fulfills her original dreams of mentorship through book clubs, discussion groups, and adventure clubs, but Girls Group also offers an intensive college prep program that includes college tours, SAT and ACT prep courses, and scholarship opportunities, as well as Women of Purpose, a program created for women who have graduated high school and are now in a position to mentor the next generation. Over the last 15 years, Girls Group has worked with 500 young women, many of whom now serve as mentors themselves.

While Girls Group was created for the youth of the area so that they might develop character, leadership skills, and self-confidence, Schooner finds she's grown personally as well. Her leadership qualities were obvious, having used her business acumen to build a financially stable organization, but she didn't have emotional range. So she started by depending on her staff to help her temper her corporate mentality, which she admits at times lacked empathy.

"At the age of 50, I had never once cried in my life," she says. "By then, I'd had breast cancer three times and my mother was dead—I hadn't cried through any of that. Girls Group is all about accessing emotions and learning to love yourself; and if you love yourself, then you can love other people and take bigger chances."

Since starting Girls Group, she's actually cried—a big step for a woman who has approached her entire life with a "get it done" attitude. And when she did shed those tears for her mom, it was the mothers of her Girls Group students who comforted her. "That's just a huge part of what this journey has been about," says Schooner. "I was a super smart, super hardworking kid that didn't deal with emotions or feelings. I just got stuff done, and I got stuff done really well. I wasn't the most nurturing touchy-feely boss, and it worked until I realized that there were so many other skill sets that I needed to access."

Schooner knows women and society will continue to deal with tough issues like the question she faced 15 years ago in her

first mentorship role—but she also knows Girls Group is giving these young women the tools and guidance to navigate their futures in a complicated world through education and emotional well-being. And while she still can't answer that question posed to her back in 2003, she works to build up strong women who can continue to address it and provide safe spaces for the next generation to talk about it.

Schooner can't possibly develop a personal relationship with all 500 of Girls Group's women, as much as she would like to—but she's particularly proud of the successes of those first groups of women, one of whom has followed in her footsteps. Today that once-shy student, who was teased in school for working hard, is now mentoring others, presenting to big audiences, and earning a significant income at Ford.

"Today she owns her power," says Schooner, "and it is very cool."