

# Building a Better Future

**Sue Schooner '79** helps young women believe that "yes, they can."

BY NICHOLE BAZEMORE '94

**W**hen you're raised with expectations and specific benchmarks for achievement—like graduating from college and climbing the corporate ladder—it's hard to imagine that everyone else is not on the same path.

Likewise, if none of your friends, family, or acquaintances has ever gone to college or achieved any type of financial or professional success, it's hard to imagine that you could be the first. But Sue Schooner '79 is on a mission to create a generation of "firsts."

As executive director of Girls Group, an Ann Arbor, Michigan, based nonprofit whose goal is to help middle and high school girls achieve emotional and economic security through professional and educational activities, Schooner knows a thing or two about being first.

After graduating from IC with a degree in accounting, she went on to earn her MBA from Harvard. After graduating, she quickly ascended the corporate ladder, becoming the youngest and first female controller at Chrysler. She spent 10 years there before leaving to become chief financial officer at Textron Automotive. Schooner later became an independent consultant, operating her own automotive supplies business for 10 years.

"I was good at what I did, and I loved my work," she recalls of her days in the for-profit world. But soon she would find something she loved even more.

Despite her terribly demanding career, Schooner had always made time to volunteer.

"I had done tax returns for low-income people when I lived in New York City and Boston, and I also had done work to help people who wanted to start small businesses," she says.

When she moved to Ann Arbor in 2003, Schooner began serving on the board of directors for a nonprofit women's center. The center had social work interns who also worked with middle school girls. Once a week, the girls would meet and dish on issues like boys, sex, stress and anxiety, and problems they were having with their parents. Schooner says the discussion groups were an "intentional type of space, where the girls could have heart-to-heart discussions, share their feelings and 'let it all hang out.'" The candor and camaraderie was invigorating, even for a 40-something corporate executive who never wanted kids of her own.

"They were funny and smart and interesting. These kids were



Sue Schooner '79 (left) took the girls on a field trip to the University of Michigan Museum of Modern Art.

really cool. What was a one-day-a-week thing turned into something that was all the time," Schooner says.

In fact, Schooner was spending so much time with the girls that she decided to retire from her high-profile job—at age 48—to run the group full time. Girls Group was born, and its mission was simple: to encourage girls to stay in school, avoid drugs and teenage pregnancy, and plan for college and the future.

But getting it going wouldn't be easy. Like all start-ups, this one was rife with challenges. For starters, there was the issue of money. Schooner funded the organization herself for two years—while drawing no salary of her own—and now had to fund-raise to keep the group afloat. But perhaps the greatest challenge was earning the trust of the girls and their mothers and trying to conquer their self-limiting ideas about their potential.

"They didn't know people who looked like them could go to college," she said. "We were the first people who said to them, 'Hey, you can go to college.' But nobody believed us. It didn't seem real."

So, to make it real, Schooner began taking the girls on out-of-state college tours. She remembers the first time, six years ago, when a group of girls boarded a plane for one such visit. "They thought I was trying to kill them. But once we got up in the air, they began to realize you can go someplace else and recreate your life as you want. The only confines are in your mind. That's really empowering."

To date, all 25 of Girls Group's "graduates" have gone on to college, and they were the first in their families to do so. Fifteen middle school girls are currently enrolled in the program; 30 high school girls mentor the younger girls or volunteer with the organization in other ways. Girls Group provides college prep, summer camp, one-on-one mentoring, middle school mentoring, and homework assistance.

While the work is still all-consuming—Schooner says she sees a lot of the kids and their parents more than she sees her own family—she doesn't regret leaving her high-profile, high-paying corporate job and the prestige it provided.

"This has fed my heart in ways other things hadn't. Every day I do this, I'm learning something new. It's nice getting to know the kids personally and watching them grow and mature into lovely young women." ■