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Group helps girls realize dreams

About nine years ago, Sue Schooner moved to Ann Arbor and left a career as a successful automobile executive. Used to involvement in a stimulating, problem-solving environment, before long she gravitated to focusing her energies on the needs of middle school and high school girls to encourage them to think of themselves as high school graduates and first-generation college attendees.

Sue knew full well that a girl without a high school diploma has a 90 percent chance of being poor and raising children who will live in poverty.

She faced a daunting challenge, but she was able to attract middle school girls who responded to her vision for them.

The original members of the Girls Group were more familiar with friends who dropped out of school to have babies than with girls who graduated from high school. And they certainly didn't know anyone who had attended college. Now Girls Group can look back on eight years of accomplishments with 100 percent of its participants having graduated from high school. As of this fall, 37 are first-generation college students at 17 different colleges and universities.

Initially, the girls weren't sure they were college material and weren't aware of the intense preparations required to be admitted to a respected

university. For the first few years, Sue provided the financial support for the project herself, but now Girls Group is a 501(c)3 nonprofit and sends participants to college-prep summer camps at universities such as James Madison in Virginia and UCLA. Making it possible for them to be the first members of their families to visit a historically black college, travel by plane and attend a college-prep summer camp, creates a mindset which helps young women break the cycle of generational poverty.

Committed to that concept, Girls Group over its relatively short existence has helped young women delay pregnancy, graduate from high school and pursue a college education, and in the process these young women are on their way to becoming successful wage earners and taxpayers. These young women will also be able to create safer and more successful futures for their children. In addition, Girls Group has created a "positive peer pressure environment" in which the college students mentor the high school students and high school students mentor middle school students. It is an empowering situation which increases its impact every year.

Girls Group has been able to create a "best-in-class" organization with an enviable record. It provides wrap-around, holistic programming on a year-round basis. It is available 24/7

for individual counseling, homework and organizational support. Its staff and volunteers work to make programming creative, educational, current and "real." Monthly Youth Council meetings help the young women actively plan and facilitate new and interesting discussion topics. Also very important are the quarterly mother/daughter workshops that ensure parents are actively and emotionally involved in their daughters' growth and future.

Recent Friday discussion groups have included topics such as self defense, inner beauty, eating disorders and getting over the fear of asking for help. Monthly community service projects help young women feel empowered and they enjoy making a difference in the lives of others. One-on-one mentoring and counseling ensure that they have a voice in both a group and private environment. Girls Group meets young women "where they are" and helps them realize their individual dreams.

Having operated largely as a very low-overhead organization with long-term volunteer support, the recently finished rigorous five-year plan is focused on taking the necessary steps to ensure that Girls Group has a long and successful future. Those of us who have witnessed the amazing difference it has made in young lives look forward to that realization.