

# ARTICLE NOTABLE NONPROFIT: GIRLS GROUP

## EMPOWERING GIRLS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL AND BEYOND

By Maggie McMillin, *Ann Arbor Observer*

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It's going to take more than a stay-at-home order to put a damper on Girls Group. When Covid shut down graduation season, the local nonprofit put together videos honoring its graduates and delivered gift bags to their homes. "It was pretty stunning," says executive director Sue Schooner.

Now in its 16<sup>th</sup> year, Girls Group guides and supports 550 girls and young women in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti as they navigate middle school, high school, college, and professional life. The goal is to "empower young women to achieve emotional and economic self-sufficiency by ensuring they graduate from high school and begin their college or career journeys." Programming runs year-round and focuses on four major themes: social and emotional life skills, academic readiness, financial readiness, and community service. All programs have been virtual since April, supplemented by individual support to participants and families.

Girls Group's carefully-planned programming covers essential topics while leaving room for participants' input. "Things have to be relevant and current," says Schooner. Recent topics include "staying hopeful, believing in yourself, and family relationships." Black Lives Matter has been front-and-center in students' minds, and many participants are struggling with the effects of Covid-19. "The young women we serve (and their families) have been disproportionately impacted by the economic, psychological, and health impacts of the virus." Girls Group's laptop and college scholarships can ease this burden, while virtual graduation

celebrations and lessons on self-care raise spirits.

Ariana Fisher, a junior at Grand Valley State University, has been involved with Girls Group since she was in tenth grade. She is now a part of Women of Purpose, a Girls Group mentorship, discussion, and community service program for high school graduates. The group recently discussed finances and independence. "A lot of us are in college, we're starting our journey into adulthood," notes Fisher. "One of the last topics we talked about was self-care options, and what we're doing to stay afloat during this time." Fisher also had the chance to share some of her knowledge in a virtual class for middle school Girls Group members.

She says that her mentor, Bianca Victor, has been inspirational. "Miss Bianca is good at tailoring our discussions to our interests. Whatever we need and want, she goes and prepares that for us. She's like a mother to a lot of us. She tells us, 'Before you do anything crazy, call Miss Bianca and make sure that's actually what you want to do.'"

Girls Group has formed close bonds with families, too, which allows it to bridge communication gaps with the public schools. "Ann Arbor Public Schools wanted to ensure that all students had access to laptops," says Schooner. "Because we have close relationships with families, we could figure out who needed laptops. And because we have a close relationship with AAPS, we got them delivered." Laptops were not provided to all students in Ypsilanti, and Girls Group paired with Comcast to secure laptops and internet hotspots.



Plans for the upcoming school year are flexible, and Girls Group is working closely with schools to review options. "We're considered an essential nonprofit for the schools," says Schooner, "although it seems unlikely that we will be inside the schools." They are currently reviewing continued virtual programming, increased individual academic and emotional support, and a variety of other scenarios.

Covid has disrupted Girls Group's regular funding streams, but Schooner notes a recent spirit of giving among individual donors and grant funders. "A lot of people are stepping up; people who got stimulus checks who said 'I don't need this money.' Everyone wants to make a difference now." She is thankful for the donors who understand the direct and lasting impact of the organization.

"We meet girls in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and we're together for a lifetime." No matter the limitations, Schooner says, "we will be an active part of their lives."