

It was heartwarming to see our three interviewees on our video call together. As each one logged on, they greeted each other joyfully, with big smiles on their faces. Ayona and Shavanna were two of the original participants in Girls Group, which was founded 18 years ago by Sue Schooner. I could tell that their relationship is special and goes beyond just being former participants in a youth program. They consider themselves family. And although Ayona and Shavanna were the ones being mentored and supported, Sue's path in life was enriched beyond measure. Here is her story.

GROWING PERSONAL EQUITY

In my mid-forties, I was climbing the corporate ladder in the automotive industry. I had been a financial executive at Chrysler, then Textron Automotive, and was currently co-running an automotive turnaround firm. Having recently moved to Ann Arbor, I was looking for a way to give back to my community and enrich my life outside of work.

I was interested in becoming a mentor to local girls and young women. Through Peace Neighborhood Center and the Women's Center of Southeast Michigan, I was able to meet girls who lived at Pine Lake Cooperative Housing. I started working with a few social work interns from the University of Michigan as well as my close friends, and we all served as volunteers.

We started out with a small group of middle school girls. Shavanna and Ayona were among them, whom we now affectionately call "The Originals." Once I met Shavanna and Ayona and a dozen other girls who touched my soul, there was never really anything else that mattered more to me, and thus Girls Group was born.

Our purpose was clear, and remains our mission today. Girls Group empowers young women to achieve emotional and economic self-sufficiency by ensuring they graduate from high school and begin their college or career journeys. Participants are mentored by experienced staff and interns through year-round



(From L to R) Girls Group original participant Ayona Van Horn-Lee, executive director Sue Schooner, and original participant Shavanna Thompson. *Photo by Emily Rose Imagery*

comprehensive programming focused on academic readiness, social/emotional life skills, financial education, and community service.

When I started Girls Group 18 years ago, we were so small that I was able to become very close with the original group of participants. As I followed the girls along their journey and witnessed the reality of the obstacles they faced, I developed a stronger social justice mindset, which now guides our work. I also realized that I was drawn to these young women and this work as a way to heal the pain and longing from my own childhood.

FINDING AND EMBRACING MY OWN VULNERABILITY

By the time I was 50, I had survived breast cancer three times. Throughout my diagnosis, treatment, surgeries, and other obstacles in life, I had never shed one tear. I grew up in a household where feelings were not okay, getting sick was not okay, and crying was definitely not okay. I had suppressed my emotions and didn't know any differently.

One day, I experienced an emotional breakthrough. I was helping facilitate a

workshop at Girls Group. It was a mother-daughter program on puberty. Often, the girls and moms will begin the workshop rolling their eyes at each other and feeling uncomfortable. This was especially true on this day, as the topic was making many feel vulnerable.

The main facilitator began to talk to the girls about how their breasts will change through puberty. I found myself secretly rolling my eyes, thinking *Well, I don't have those anymore because of breast cancer.* Then we started talking about periods; I had had my ovaries removed since I had the breast cancer gene, so again I rolled my eyes, thinking *Well, I don't have periods anymore either.* Then I noticed the girls and moms starting to sit closer to one another as they experienced a growing sense of intimacy between them that wasn't there at the start of the program. I said to myself, *Well, my mom is dead, I won't have any more of these moments with her.* But then the sudden realization of that hit me: *Yes, my mom is dead, but I actually never had an intimate moment like this with her.*

That's when 50 years of suppressed feelings poured out of me. I sat on the floor in the corner of the room and started crying for the first time in my life. One

of the moms left the circle to sit with me and to hold me. As I continued to cry, each mom in the room took turns sitting with me, holding me as I cried as I had never cried before. This went on for over two hours, and it changed my life forever. There was no turning back on finally feeling, owning, and expressing my emotions. I have learned that although feelings are terrifying, accessing them will open the world for you.

Girls Group has a strong academic and career focus, but I think the glue that holds all of our programming together is the consistent messaging to the participants that says “You’re special, you’re beautiful, you’re wonderful just the way you are, you are forgiven, you are loved, you can forgive, we’re here for you, and we can overcome this together.” I certainly didn’t feel this way as a child or young woman, and it’s been healing for me to create a community that is based on this premise and belief.

CHECKS AND BALANCES

If Girls Group was a song, it would be a mix of classical music and jazz. The classical music is all of the right things being in the right place, working together, using a proven formula, and staying on track. The jazz portion is the ability to riff off of everything that’s happening and just bring joy.

Coming from a background of accounting, I’m proud to say that we’re probably one of the most organized nonprofits around. On top of operating with endless beautiful spreadsheets, we blend in passion, creativity, emotion, and amazing people to make our mission happen.

Girls Group has been a successful and vibrant nonprofit for 18 years. Currently, we serve almost 700 girls throughout Washtenaw County. We facilitate 20 weekly programs within the public schools, as well as college and career prep, Women of Purpose, and summer programming. Thus far, we’ve had 240 young women graduate from high school, some of whom are first-generation high school graduates. We’ve also had 46 young women — often first-generation college students — graduate from a four-year university, obtain an associate degree, or earn professional certification. Every single girl that graduates high school and/or goes on to college is a role model for the next group of girls.



(From L to R) Girls Group original participant Ayona Van Horn-Lee, executive director Sue Schooner, and original participant Shavanna Thompson. *Photo by Emily Rose Imagery*

CREDITS AND DEBITS DURING TIMES OF COVID

Girls Group is traditionally a very hands-on agency. Due to the pandemic, Girls Group staff quickly pivoted and provided consistent virtual programming from April 2020 through May 2021. The virtual programming was fun, inspirational, creative, and helped to support the academic and social-emotional needs of the participants. However, we were so excited to return to in-person programming in June!

During the pandemic, we felt grateful to have built stronger relationships with the families of participants. Although we focused primarily on meeting the needs of the young women we serve, we always honor our relationships with parents. We spent more time this past year being a listening ear to these parents and helping families access much-needed resources such as food, utility payments, and cleaning supplies. Moving forward, our intent continues to be to share timely information with families, provide more family/participant activities, and have adequate staff resources to continue being a listening ear to parents.

This summer, Girls Group doubled its summer programming to help participants regain the confidence, laughter, and stability needed to return to school in September. We continue to focus on helping students to rebuild their academic muscles. A high percentage of Girls Group participants struggle in

school during a “normal” year, and the pandemic has affected this population disproportionately. Many girls spent the last year and a half caring for younger siblings or older family members and helping with the household bills.

After over a year of trauma, chaos, and isolation, this fall will be a time of “readiness and recovery.” Girls Group has the training, desire, and skillsets to do this essential work. We also recognize that this level of social-emotional work is extremely time-consuming and emotionally draining. Girls Group is ready and passionate about providing this much-needed support, but is also cognizant that incremental staff support will be necessary to support our initiatives.

HUMAN AND FINANCIAL CAPITAL

We are holding a virtual fundraiser on October 16th, and we welcome all who would like to attend. The 30-minute event will share financial and growth information, but more importantly, we will share stories from our participants about their experiences with Girls Group. This compelling event will encourage guests to think, laugh, cry, and leave feeling uplifted.

We appreciate all of the love and encouragement we’ve received from our supporters and the community over these nearly two decades. We could not do what we do without this passionate support, as well as the financial contributions that allows us to continue our mission’s

work. We have an annual budget of \$1.1 million dollars. We have extremely low overhead. A high percentage of our funding is earmarked to pay our eleven full-time, well-educated, and dedicated staff members. We also work with a dozen social work interns from the University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University, and Wayne State University. We thank them for their inspirational service as well.

Although fundraising is paramount, “friend-raising” — learning and sharing our mission — is just as important for our cause. With awareness, I know we can influence a powerful paradigm shift. All

young people have potential if we put the same love and attention into every child. This shift not only impacts each child, but also the entire community.

Something Shavanna once said has stuck with me all these years: “When I come to Girls Group, I don’t feel invisible anymore.” And that’s the reality of our society. There are all of these talented, brilliant, and caring young people out there going unnoticed. But when you give them the same emotional and academic toolkits, they can be just as successful as other kids that are more privileged.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

In my 18 years of operating Girls Group, my life has been enriched beyond any measure I ever expected. In creating a loving community, I’ve found the love that I was searching for during my youth and young adulthood. Girls Group participants have shown me bravery, resilience, humor, acceptance, and love.

And Girls Group as an organization has proven that when you change the destiny of a young woman, you affect generations. I encourage you to find your truth, own your truth, speak your truth, and then help others do the same.

WHAT GIRLS GROUP MEANS TO US



Photo by Emily Rose Imagery

SHAVANNA THOMPSON, 30

Wayne State University and Washtenaw Community College

Currently a phlebotomist and planning on attending beauty school this fall

I joined Girls Group in the sixth grade. I was looking for a supportive group of girls that I could interact with and talk to. I wasn’t in any sports or extracurricular activities. I was a loner, but was longing to find my place. I was excited to hear that Sue had created this group and felt lucky to join.

At first, it was just fun eating pizza (thank you, Cottage Inn), laughing, talking, and hanging out. But what I realized later is that something greater was happening. We were learning and growing into the women we are today.

Girls Group is a sisterhood to me. It allowed me to learn about myself and express myself in ways that I couldn’t before. It opened doors for me — like college — that I didn’t even think were possibilities for me. I don’t know or want to know where I’d be today without the love and support of Girls Group. It laid the foundation and guided me through life when I felt very lost, and for that I am forever grateful.



Photo by Emily Rose Imagery

AYONA VAN HORN-LEE, 29

Michigan State University

Works at Ford Motor Company in IT after attending their rotation program

My twin sister, Asia, and I joined Girls Group right before sixth grade. My parents were hoping it would get us out of our shells and out of the house a bit more. Since I’m a twin, it was always “Asia and Ayona.” Girls Group helped us find and love our individual selves.

When we had fundraisers, Sue would have us write essays for the events. At the time, I wasn’t sure why she was having us do this. Fast forward a few years later, and we were having to write essays for college admissions; I realized she had a plan for us all along. She believed in us long before we even had the idea of college in our heads. My sister and I just thought we’d graduate high school and start work. Having the opportunity to go on college tours and be mentored through the entire college application process was such a gift. Girls Group allowed us to create our own paths and encouraged us to never stop dreaming.