



## Girls learn to take charge of their lives

By Liza Frenette - New York Teacher - November 20, 2009



Nettie Crossman, a retired member of the Schenectady Federation of Teachers, right, and parent Michelle Williams lead a workshop on vocal expression. Photo by Steve Jacobs.

This Girls Day Out wasn't about going to the mall. It was to show middle school girls how to get pumped up with voice and self-esteem, not with fists or flying insults.

It was about learning how to deal constructively with problems most middle school girls face: unhealthy relationships, friendship drama, bullying, parents who do not understand. It was about putting a stop to bullying, about finding true expression in poetry, dance and drumming, and learning leadership skills.

This first Girls Day Out event took place in Schenectady, where the community is still seeking closure after four girls from city schools committed suicide last year. It's likely bullying played a role.

One hundred and fifty girls, ranging in age from 12 to 14, from all of the city's middle schools took part. Four more after-school sessions will take place in the next four months.

The program is guided by women from the Schenectady County Working Group on Girls, modeled after a United Nations program, and a generous host of community volunteers, agencies and organizations, including NYSUT.

The students were at once diverse and the same. In one workshop, the girls ranged from a diminutive 4 feet, 8 inches to a full-grown 5 feet, 6 inches — a classic disparity in middle school where students' voices, bodies and emotions change at different rates and extremes.

Most wore blue jeans. Many had pony tails and big hoop earrings, one a set of large silver peace signs. And all were familiar with "getting jumped" — beat up, attacked — some from experience, some from talk in school hallways and social networking sites.

"My friend, she got jumped last month," explained one girl. "Me, my friend and my sister, we all went to talk to them to find out why. We all got jumped. They said they jumped my friend because she was wearing the wrong sneakers."

Angelique Williams, founder of Girl Power Mentoring, told the girls their first thought should be safety.

One girl shook her head.

"If my friend is jumped, I'm going to jump in."

"You do dirt. You get dirt." another said.

Williams and co-presenter Karen Baum of the Center for Community Justice encouraged the girls to report incidents or threats to a parent, teacher, school counselor, or another adult.

Another girl shook her head.

"I handle my biz like I handle my biz," she said.

"If she tells a guidance counselor, they're going to go after her next," said another girl.

"That's what you guys don't get."

Williams told the girls they can write a note anonymously and put it under a counselor's door.

"It's not snitching if it's about safety," she said.

Girls in another workshop brainstormed ideas about how to deal with anger, such as:

- Going somewhere else and screaming out frustrations
- Going for a run
- Jumping rope
- Writing down feelings
- Getting away to somewhere quiet and calming down.

Girls learned that signs of unhealthy relationships include being ignored, being told you're a bother, being ordered around or controlled, and being disrespected.

"We know you girls are dealing with some very serious issues," Williams said.

Together, the group decided that bullying is at work in these forms:

- Hitting
- Gossip
- Taking someone else's money or possessions
- Texting about someone
- Sexting
- Hurting someone else because you don't feel good about yourself
- Putting false or bad information about someone on a Web site
- Picking on someone for their skin color, living circumstances, or what they know or don't know.

Many later expressed feelings about being hurt, or the wonder of becoming a young woman, in a poetry workshop led by Gwynne DeLong, a retired member of the Schenectady Federation of Teachers, and Maureen Johnson of SAFE Inc.

DeLong, a member of Working Group on Girls, joined other volunteers working with local school counselors, social workers and psychologists to prepare for the program.

"I want girls to learn they can take charge of their lives, and to know they have a community that cares about them," she said.

Ebony Belmar, a social worker at Mont Pleasant Middle School and one of the many school practitioners involved, said Girls Day Out will be an annual event.

Mont Pleasant school counselor Catherine Snyder helped with the planning, then spent the day with her camera photographing the faces that changed with information, or movement, or delight.

Big smiles came out for the camera from girls singing "We're strong and we're mighty and we're beautiful!"

Smiles and tears emerged in the poetry workshop. "I am a lion. I am a swan. I am a woman. I am me," one girl read.

"I don't make my past my present, I make it my story," read another.

"I am more than what the world says I am to be," wrote yet another. "I am a poet. I write what's on the inside."

Presenters encouraged the girls to "be about" the change, rather than talk about it, and to make anti-bullying a total commitment.

### **Have the courage to face down bullying**

- Educators around the state are invited to "21st Century Bullying and Its Implications for Schools," a one-day conference co-sponsored by the New York State Educational Conference Board.
- The Dec. 10 conference at the Desmond hotel in Albany will feature a keynote address by Kevin Jennings, assistant secretary of education for the U.S. Department of Education, who delivered a riveting speech at NYSUT's Representative Assembly in April.
- The agenda includes a panel of experts to discuss the prevalence of cyberbullying and how to improve school climate. Other sessions will discuss legal implications and highlight successful prevention programs.
- The Educational Conference Board is a broad coalition of the state's major education organizations, including NYSUT.

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The cost of the conference is \$75, which includes lunch. For more information and to register, go to [www.nysecb.org/](http://www.nysecb.org/).

**Local makes donation for future events**

Juliet Benaquisto, middle school teacher and president of the Schenectady Federation of Teachers, presented a check for \$500 to the Girls Day Out organizers on behalf of the local union "so events like this can happen."

Facing a roomful of girls and community leaders, she recalled how "the suicides last year affected everybody in so many ways — this is something positive that came out of it. It was the catalyst that got everyone together."

She told the girls that teachers and counselors all care about how they make it through middle school.

While grades matter, she said, middle school can be the toughest years. "We just want you to do well."

"Many adults support you, even on days when you think you don't get along. We wanted to do something special for you," Benaquisto said.

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