

Dares and Fears, Hopes and Dreams of Middle School Girls

By Sophie Braccini

"I had no idea what I was getting into," said Anna, a 6th grader at Stanley Middle School, "for me, the best part of the day was that I made a new friend and had a lot of fun." Anna's parents, like many of us, recognize that middle school can be a challenging time for our young women, caught in the difficult webs of social life, aches and pains of growing up, and so many questions about what the future holds. So they registered her for the Sister-to-Sister Summit sponsored by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) on March 15th at Acalanes High School. The day was envisioned as providing girls a respite, a time to celebrate being a young woman, a moment to share and connect with other girls their age and to their "bigger sisters" in high school.

"I had even more fun than last year," said Sarah, a 7th grader at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School, "the facilitators were really good, they gave great advice". For example if you had a friend who is really down, instead of just giving her a hug, have a 'girl-day' with her, take her out to Starbucks or something."

"Sister to sister is a day where you can just relax and not worry about what people are going to say or think about you,"



Sister-to-Sister middle school girls surround the chair of a champion Heather Wilsperien. Photo by Sophie Braccini.

"it's a day to be happy to be a girl.

As part of the day, the girls created a mural where their "hopes and dreams" were represented as paper sail boats, and their "fears and dares", materialized on the back of sharks. Their hopes and dreams were not unexpected from a group of middle school girls: travel, having fun, being a star, being beautiful, getting a boy friend and having good grades, were the most common. The dares and fears reflected our society: "failure not to be good enough" was highlighted in its many forms, expressing the pressure and stress our daughters are under. Others expressed fear of the dark, of loneliness, of loss of loved ones.

deep in the psyche of our teens.

The AAUW women got to experience it themselves as Valerie Burgess and Edy Schwartz presented the results of the "Sister to Sister" summit at a recent meeting. The women of AAUW were challenged to remember their own middle-school experiences. After a short time, many strong feelings re-emerged. One woman remembered how she herself had been cruel to her sister, another remembered the loneliness of that period of time. Most recalled long-lasting friendships as well and groups and activities that kept them connected.

The feeling of connection is a central and recurring theme of the summit. The AAUW women

Each woman got a ribbon, like the girls had, that represented each of them. Each ribbon had a different color, meaning that they were different but at the same time, the same. The women tied the ribbons together to materialize a bond between them. It created a trust knowing that everybody was linked. At the end of the day, they cut the ribbons, going home with a knot to remember that each woman/girl is more than just one next to another, but part of a sisterhood.