

Orinda Community Church Aunties Up

Initiative encourages Lamorinda girls to shine – sensibly

By Laurie Snyder



Girlpower participants with The Aunties (Orinda Community Church mentors). Back row, from left: Jackie Popper, Sue Boudreau, Elisabeth Kersten, and Betty Karplus; front row: Georgia Carpenter, Harper Bergquist, Michaela Thomas, and Leslie Darwin O'Brien
Photo courtesy Jim Brommers Bergquist

Seventeen tweens and teens recently took part in an innovative, five-week initiative. Open to young women of all faiths across Lamorinda, Girlpower strengthened their sense of community and self, and was so well received that Orinda Community Church organizers are already planning future events.

Girlpower began with "Dinner with The Aunties" – women aged 35 to 90 who helped the girls explore the differences between being good, kind and nice, when it's okay to be competitive and not, and "the idea that when one person succeeds, we all succeed," says Leslie Darwin O'Brien, OCC's director of community life. "We do a great job in the Bay Area with academics and sports, but we stink at helping kids and adults soothe themselves. I'm especially concerned about the mean girl scene, unhealthy competition and a lack of self-esteem, and hope to build a buffer community for young women."

According to Kappa Delta Sorority's Confidence Coalition, weakened self-worth lessens lifetime earnings, hampers leadership ability and impairs health. While more than half of Americans are female, women hold just 16 seats in Congress. Seventy-five percent of girls with low self-esteem "engage in disordered eating, bullying, smoking or drinking." Women 16 to 24 suffer the most intimate partner violence – triple the national average – but only 33 percent tell anyone they're being hurt.

"We're doing preventive medicine. If you're feeling good about yourself, you're likely to be kinder to others," explains O'Brien.

"One of the greatest assets about Girlpower," says Auntie Elisabeth Kersten, "is the ability to talk about the meaning of life and other deep things – or issues one simply can't talk about in school. And the girls participate because they want to."

"It was enlightening – what was on their minds, what they thought they were doing well and not – peer pressure, bullying – same gender and the need to not let boys push them into bad situations," says Auntie Jackie Popper. "We heard about girls they know who face things they aren't facing. As they reflected on 'What would I do if this happened to me or a friend?' we helped them see they aren't alone. We all need support – whether building confidence around science projects or not putting others into positions of victimization."

Popper and her fellow Aunties want girls or even adults who might be reading this to know, "If ever you're in a bad situation or dark place, there are people you can call. You don't have to worry about getting into trouble or being judged; we'll always pick up the phone."

The girls created a "sister code" for how to treat others every day. "I so value my friendships with women of different ages, which offer perspective," says O'Brien. "We are blessed

in Lamorinda to be surrounded by wisdom." The importance of recognizing the sacred in everyone and everything was stressed as were the values of confidence, self-worth, respect, creativity, and intuition.

Elizabeth Perlman and Maureen Brown of the Intuitive Writing Project prompted girls to explore why they're glad they're "not Barbie," and Our Whole Lives Human Sexuality Leader, Ann Sherpick, helped participants understand that nonexistent bodies in heavily retouched photos create unattainable fantasy.

"Hearing the girls' writing was an epiphany," says Kersten. "The emotions that came up were powerful, poignant, revealing. It showed how much is going on – fear, joy, hope. What I find very authentic about this program is that it isn't all about self-love; it's about showing kindness, caring about the community and about others. Those values are also part of beauty."

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Time for a Village Uprising – The Outlook for Girls and Women:

- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents and teenagers. Teen girls are more likely to attempt suicide.
- 1 girl is bullied every 7 minutes nationwide in schoolyards, playgrounds, stairwells, classrooms, or bathrooms.
- 57 percent of rock music videos portray women as a sex object, a victim, as unintelligent, or in an otherwise condescending or misogynistic way.
- 1 in 3 American adolescents have been abused physically, sexually, emotionally or verbally by dating partners – a rate far higher than other types of youth violence.
- Approximately 70 percent of college students say they have been sexually coerced.
- Only 2 percent of women think they are beautiful.

Sources: Kappa Delta Sorority's Confidence Coalition (<http://confidencecoalition.org/statistics-women>) and Love Is Respect (www.loveisrespect.org/).

No Girl Left Behind – The Sister Code

- Think first before speaking.
- Be kind. Be supportive. Be positive. Be a friend. Don't let your buddies belittle themselves. Give compliments even if not needed.
- Don't badger anyone for her secrets, but be a friend if she needs one by listening and keeping her confidence if she does choose to share.
- Deal directly. Don't say anything you wouldn't say to your friend's face.
- Don't be racist. Don't call other girls names. Don't body shame or comment on what anyone else eats. Don't wear high brand clothes just because everyone else does. Don't pick sides. Don't pressure people to be different.
- Be who you are. You're smart and beautiful just the way you are.

If someone you know is hurting herself in some way, talk with an adult you trust. If she's being hurt by domestic or dating violence, call STAND! for confidential advice: 1-888-215-5555. Nationwide, call: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

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Sunday
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