

InSpire

Every Woman Has A Story

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Project Girl

By Renee Wahlen Tillema

Today's mass media is an important part of everyone's life – from spreading alerts on important weather-related announcements, to informing viewers about political candidates opinions, and even helping to find missing children. But, when media is used to influence young people on what clothing makes them popular or what they should look like or how much they should weigh, has media gone too far?

Those are some of the questions that have been asked by many parents today, including two Madison area women. Kelly Parks Snider and Jane Bartell are both mothers and artists who have been working together to create Wisconsin's first art-based ini-

tiative that teaches girls to be media literate.

"We both believe in the value of art," Kelly said. "We both believe that art can transform the world. We believe in using art as a means to examine our culture and educate ourselves to look differently at our culture."

Kelly, a visual artist, and Jane, a video producer, have come to this project as both artists and mothers. Kelly has three daughters and she has watched them making their way through a culture that has been largely negative about what it means to be a girl. She said media has branded

today's young girls as a generation only interested in shopping, beauty products or competing with each other over boyfriends.

"I don't know any girls like that to be honest," Kelly said. "So I think that it's a big lie, but unfortunately there's a tremendous amount of money being marketed to target these girls in a way that has very little concern about their wellbeing."

Jane has an adolescent son, and while she realizes that boys are also subjected to the same media pressures, she has found that these are two separate issues. They can't be lumped under one umbrella. Jane came to this project from a very unique background. She recently moved to Madison from Los Angeles where she had worked in the entertainment industry. Jane admits to being "very happily imbedded in the problem." She described her life there as very exciting and very wonderful, but she wanted to expose her son to the values and culture of Madison where she had grown up.

"As my son grew, I become aware through him and through Kelly and other moms, of the fact that the things I was trying to get away from in Los Angeles, all of a sudden were here," Jane said. "I wondered if we were imagining this or has there been a really concerted increase in the way marketing messages are being targeted to our kids."

After getting "a little fired up" about the millions of dollars that are spent annually on trying to control thoughts, behaviors and habits through media advertising, Kelly and Jane started asking questions about why this was happening. They began talking with national activists and experts and realized that their next step was in going right to the source. A diverse group of 30 girls from the Madison area were selected for an advisory board. They committed to monthly meetings with Kelly and Jane for one year. From this, Project Girl was created.

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“It was from those experiences that we were inspired to create the Project Girl exhibition,” Kelly said. “This is a public art exhibition that examines these issues and provides a springboard for ideas, thoughts and educational themes for kids to look at this differently.”

A Project Girl exhibition uses Kelly’s art work to illustrate the issues in an artistic way, there is also artwork from actual workshop participants and these pieces help validate why the issues are important. Video images are also used to help reflect just what power mass marketing has over influencing decisions.

“Media isn’t inherently evil,” Jane said. “It’s the message in the media and behind the use of the media and what they are trying to accomplish. We feel that media is primary and very fundamentally important to our objective of getting the word out.”

Project Girl uses art as a way to level the playing field, it is able to help engage, challenge, and explore the topic for not only the girls, but their parents, educators, activists, and members of the community. The target age of Project Girl is in the 13-15 year old range. This is such a transitional time for adolescents anyways, a time of discovering who they are and what they are about.

“The media messages are shaping how these kids feel about themselves,” Kelly said. Jane added, “It’s out of control and there is no accountability, there are no regulations. As parents we reach a tipping point and we can’t take it anymore. Kelly and I are to that point and we feel something needs to be done.”

The unique aspect of Project Girl is that while a message is at the heart of this whole venture, there is no preaching involved. Through the art-based endeavor, all girls are accepted. Kelly said art works because the girls connect in a very personal way. It’s something each girl can be a part of and take ownership.

“If we can get them talking and ask-



Project Girl creators Jane Bartell and Kelly Parks Snider.

ing questions, that’s a great first step,” Jane said. “To the extent in which they integrate it into their lives, we don’t know – we hope. Even if they just think twice when they walk down an aisle and see those larger than life posters in the stores and wonder what they are looking at, they are at least thinking about it. We’re planting seeds.”

Kelly said that the Project Girl workshops not only educate the girls on the media’s untruths, but through artis-

tic expression the girls are given power by allowing them to voice their own opinions and say something that will be seen by the public. There is also an interactive website (www.projectgirl.org) which is another way to explore the issues at hand.

“What we do when we come into a community is to partner up with arts organizations, girls and youth organizations, educators, and it’s really up to that community,” Kelly said. “Some of the art from Madison will be in the

traveling exhibit, but as there are workshops in other communities, the artwork from that community will become part of the exhibit. It's really community-based art."

After a Project Girl exhibit, the artists are able to leave behind a package which is a combination of written curriculum, with DVD's and visuals of the artwork. This allows communities and organizations to continue sustaining the project.

"We just want the girls to look at the world with more critical, more informed eyes so that they aren't just victims," Jane said. "If we can first understand it, be more critical of it and then make our choices."

"Our society has become so engrossed with the end product, the reward – there is very little emphasis on just the process of living, the life," Kelly said. "It's not about who we are and that's too bad."

The Beaver Dam Area Arts Association Project Girl exhibit will run from Jan. 13 through Feb. 24. A leadership training for those who would like to lead workshop groups throughout that time will be offered on Saturday, Jan. 12 — with one training in the morning and one later in the day. On the opening day of the exhibit, Jan. 13, the creators of the program, Kelly Parks Snider and Jane Bartell of Madison, will give a presentation about Project Girl at the Seippel Center. The BDAAA is inviting area school, scout, 4 H, and other groups and organizations to sign up for a one-time workshop session, daytime, evening, or weekends throughout the six-week period. The workshop will refer to the exhibit, displayed at the Seippel Homestead and Center for the Arts, Beaver Dam, as the inspiration for dialogue about the negative effects of commercial advertising. The goal is to help participants develop effective tools when dealing with this health and self-esteem issue and to build awareness, particularly among youth, but for all ages. For further details or to sign up for leadership training or a workshop for your group, call (920) 885-3635.