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7 Local Women Stand Their Ground

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Kelly Parks Snider (left) and Jane Bartell

Kelly Parks Snider and Jane Bartell

Teaching the next generation to be critical consumers through Project Girl

By Mollie Shambeau

It started with a few questions: Why aren't girls getting along? Why do we stereotype? Why are we all so dissatisfied with the way we look?

When two local mothers, Kelly Parks Snider and Jane Bartell, asked themselves those very questions, their answers pointed to the media young girls are consuming: Magazines that depict an unattainable body, TV that showcases snide or hurtful behavior, and advertisements preying on insecurities. It was these observations that pointed the pair down a path toward Project Girl.

It started when Parks Snider noticed the catty behavior of girls in her young daughters' classrooms, such as fighting over boys and with each other. She went to the school administration and requested that something be done.

Bartell chimes in, "The answer that the administration gave—and I think a lot of people in society give as well—was: 'Well, girls will be girls.' It wasn't a good enough answer."

And so, in 2005, their project began. Knowing that changing the way media depicts girls and women bordered on impossible, Parks Snider and Bartell decided to arm young women with the tools to alter the way they perceive media messages. Admittedly, the duo had a lot to learn.

"Kelly and I came at this with a sense of righteous indignation," Bartell says. "But the more you dig into it, the more you understand that [the issue] is so much more complex than body image or materialism."

What they did know was that the project would be a cross between art and activism. With Parks Snider's artistic inclination and Bartell's passion for visual media, it was the perfect match.

After connecting with national girl advocacy groups and conducting more research than they'd ever imagined possible, the pair created a Project Girl advisory board—a diverse group of 30 middle school-aged girls from across the Madison area—to help create a curriculum.

"[These] girls committed a year of their life, every month for four hours, and they would come together and have a dialogue about the impact of media on their lives," Parks Snider says. "We were able to listen and to observe. Their ideas were paramount from the beginning."

The inspirational thoughts, artwork and literary pieces created during the advisory board sessions, paired with Parks Snider's professional artwork, Bartell's various multimedia components and insight from local mother and activist Lyn Mikel Brown together formed the curriculum and exhibition made for girls, by girls: Project Girl.

Get Involved!

Who: Adult group leaders, allies, concerned parents, and high school girls who want to make a difference in the lives of younger girls
What: Project Girl facilitator training
Where: Edgewood College
When: Saturday, November 14; 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

"We teach [girls] how to be more critical consumers and look at this world with smarter eyes," Parks Snider says. "The idea is that if girls look more critically, then they have the power. They can say 'Ah-ha! They're trying to make me feel bad about myself.'"

Project Girl has many components, including the "Project Girl Workbook: A Guide to Un-Mediafying Your Life," which is filled with girl-made artwork, writing and artistic exercises as well as mind-boggling statistics about media messages.

The program also includes a portion called, "Busted," in which girls discuss and deconstruct media messages they've been exposed to. Parks Snider says, "You'll see lots of rats on [our materials] and our logos. The idea is, 'I think I smell a rat,' which is a reminder to be suspicious...look more carefully." After that, there's a self-reflective art experience to help girls internalize the message and provide a take-home reminder of the experience.

Today, Project Girl is beginning to come full circle. Parks Snider and Bartell now train high school girls—some who participated in that first Project Girl advisory panel—to work with middle school girls throughout the school year.

"The peer-to-peer facilitation is so powerful," Bartell says. Parks Snider agrees, adding, "It's the whole circle of kids *being* the change! That's the plan."

And in addition to their work here in Madison—their "laboratory"—Parks Snider and Bartell have also mobilized the project, partnering with organizations throughout Wisconsin, as well as in 11 other states and internationally in Ankara, Turkey. Future plans for an updated, interactive Web site only promise to extend that growth.

"People are using it," Parks Snider says, beaming.

Using it, and, more importantly, learning from it. Parks Snider adds, "Project Girl is about girls making a difference, girls being the expectation and girls being the change. [They] are the solution."

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For more information on Project Girl, visit projectgirl.org.

Photo by Jessie Eisner-Kleyle