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ART MEETS

ACTIVISM

TWO MOMS PROVE A LITTLE CREATIVITY GOES A LONG WAY IN EMPOWERING TEEN GIRLS.

By Stephanie Emma Pfeffer

Photography by Narayan Mahon

In 2004 a group of middle-school girls sat cross-legged in a Madison, Wisconsin, community center at one of Project Girl's first workshops. They took turns sharing objects they'd brought from home. A 13-year-old held up an empty cup and plate and explained the symbolism: "To be as skinny as the girls in magazines," she said, "you can't eat a thing."

Project Girl is an arts-based program that helps young women become aware of negative effects of media. "We want girls to turn a suspicious eye to messages being delivered by advertisements, magazines, television shows, websites and music," says co-founder and video producer Jane Bartell, 55. "By becoming independent thinkers who control their interpretation of the messages, they will no longer be controlled by them."

The inspiration for the program came from Jane's co-founder and friend, visual artist Kelly Parks Snider, 46. Married and with three teenage daughters—Madison, 19, Carly, 18, and Ellie, 17—as well as a 14-year-old son, Mitch, Kelly was baffled by her girls' experiences in middle school. "I couldn't believe their stories of bullying, girl-on-girl meanness and disrespect," she says. "It was so different from how I remembered my all-girls school environment: supportive, positive and encouraging."

Kelly mentioned her kids' struggles to Jane (they share a passion for art and activism and have been friends since Ellie and Jane's son Joe were in the same kindergarten class). Over the years they've spearheaded after-school drawing classes, taught art at homeless shelters and created a public

art exploration of rural women in agriculture and farming. "Art helps people look at things differently," says Kelly. "In this case, we wanted to provoke a dialogue about the challenges faced by today's young women."

Jane and Kelly learned all they could about what prompts girls to fight with each other, compete for boys' attention, obsess over their looks and express dissatisfaction with their bodies. "Females don't come out of the womb competing and bickering," says Jane, who still meets her high-school girlfriends weekly for coffee. "Those are learned behaviors."

Realizing they'd have to rely on experts for answers, the two moms headed to the library to study adolescent girl development. They scoured websites and contacted leading researchers who were eager to connect with a non-

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Kelly Parks Snider (left) and Jane Bartell help girls express themselves through visual media.



Visit projectgirl.org for more information on curriculum, on-demand Web-based training programs, upcoming art exhibitions, events, and how to bring Project Girl to your community.

academic community. “Kelly is such a good networker, she’d dial up the president of the United States if necessary,” jokes Jane.

One of the first experts they approached was Lyn Mikel Brown, Ed.D., author of *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes* (St. Martin's Griffin), who told them advertisers were spending more dollars than ever targeting kids. “We learned they were being bombarded by 3,000 messages a day, whereas in the 1980s it was more like 1,500,” says Jane. The significant ramping up of messages probably contributed to how girls viewed themselves, Mikel Brown concluded. And things really had changed over the years. “When Joe and Ellie were born, the media was spending \$6.2 billion targeting kids,” says Jane. “By the time they were in kindergarten, the amount had nearly doubled.”

That's all Kelly and Jane needed to refine their mission and establish a solid goal. They would use art to help students recognize the marketing of false promises, and to resist them. But one component was still missing: kids' input. So Kelly and Jane reached out to local youth organizations like schools, art centers and community groups. “We tried to speak to girls who cared about the lives of other girls and wanted to share their thoughts on the media's effects,” says Kelly.

It was from this diverse group that the Project Girl advisory board was born. Twenty middle-school students promised to meet once a month for three to four hours—not just to learn but to help Kelly and Jane create a curriculum that would be engaging for future students. “Our advisory group taught us how to say things so other kids would understand,” says Jane. “They were crucial to the project, the true creators of change.”

The first challenge was getting these girls who were literally im-

mersed in mass culture to take a step back from the media and identify its damaging effects. “Initially they couldn't think of one positive relationship between girls, whether on television, in movies, books or songs,” says Kelly. Instead they described girls as mean gossips who fought over boys and cared more about how they looked than their own accomplishments. Kelly and Jane introduced a concept called “busting it”—identifying a media message that focuses on insecurity, then separating it from reality. For example, “busting” an ad of a scantily clad woman might involve a realization like, “This ad is trying to trick me by implying that if I look sexy and act provocatively, people will find me more attractive. But that's not true.”

Throughout the year the advisory board brought in items or advertisements that symbolized social pressures for things like beauty, thinness or sexiness. Impossibly perfect dolls, diet pills and inappropriate clothing were some of the objects that inspired art projects and eventually culminated in a collage titled “Commercial Land.” At the end of the nine-month workshop, the girls presented their art exhibition to family and friends. “Since the girls put the show together, it was a very real representation of what they cared about,” says Kelly.

That interactive experience became the program's foundation. Today, in addition to facilitated workshops for adolescent girls, Kelly and Jane offer training seminars for educators, as



The paper sculpture “Evidence of Real Bodies” depicts poor body image.

well as a traveling art exhibition, which includes pieces from the initial show along with works created by Kelly, Jane and other professional artists. Online tool kits and downloadable curriculum allow anyone who is interested in girls' self-esteem—scout troop leaders, church officials, after-school programmers, teachers—to train in media literacy. There is also a Project Girl website that incorporates teens' art, literature and poetry. Kelly



A young artist "talks back" through this collage, expressing how her life has been affected by the media.

and Jane estimate they've reached thousands of young women—it's tough to come up with an exact number because they don't track the use of their materials. Participants pass along what they've learned to others by holding their own workshops and seminars.

"AT HEART, THIS IS A GIRL-LED MOVEMENT," SAYS KELLY. "OUR STUDENTS CREATE VISUAL ART TO EMPOWER THEMSELVES AND THEIR PEERS TO IDENTIFY AND FIGHT HARMFUL MEDIA STEREOTYPES."

Although it's a grassroots effort, Jane and Kelly still spearhead the bulk of the program. Its rapid growth is both encouraging and challenging. The two are on the road several times a month leading workshops, setting up

the art exhibition or speaking to girl groups. Jane recalls one Saturday when they were expected to give a presentation in Iowa City at 9 a.m. and had planned to leave Madison Friday night. But when Ellie's school play was scheduled to open that evening, the women agreed to head out at 4 a.m. the next morning so Kelly wouldn't miss it. "Luckily, we know how to work well together," says Kelly. "When one of our lives gets busier, the other person works harder."

Project Girl receives support from numerous state and government arts agencies, as well as organizations like Best Buy @15, the Dove Foundation and Quixote Foundation. It has also partnered with the Congressional Women's Caucus Task Group on Young Women in its sponsorship of the Healthy Media Youth Act.

As for the initial advisory board, some of the participants have started their own Project Girl groups at their high schools or on college campuses. Other students have attended workshops to help middle-school kids host their own art receptions. In turn, those girls become docents, taking third-

and fourth-graders through the show. "It's a girl-led movement," says Kelly. "They really are hungry to make a difference in the lives of their peers."

In addition to the several Project Girl groups in Madison, Kelly and Jane know of other meetings in at least 15 states. They're publishing a new children's book, *ZILLY*, to reach a younger audience. And there may even be a Project Boy in the future. For now though, improving the way girls see themselves—and the relationships between them—remains Project Girl's priority. "We tell our girls to be the change they want to see in the world," says Kelly. "That's why this is really a story about them doing great things." ●



Life-sized body tracing inspired by the question, "How much of the 'real me' do I show the world?"