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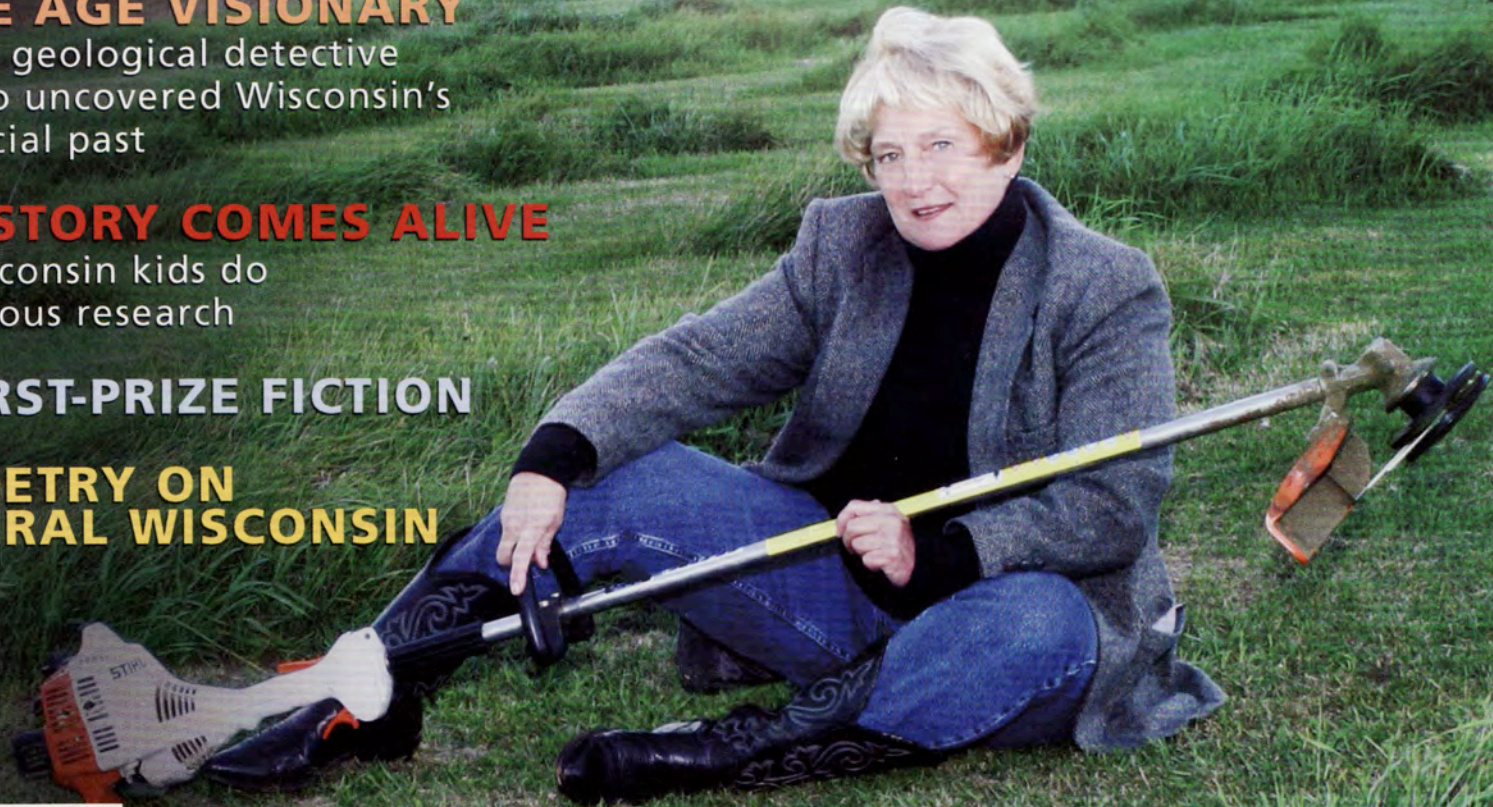
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Summer 2007  
Volume 53  
Number 3

# Girl Power



Project Girl, an interactive, traveling multimedia exhibition, website, and curriculum all in one, was started by two mothers who wanted to help girls do battle against negative cultural and commercial messages.

BY MARTIN SCANLAN

Some members of the Project Girl gang.

Photos by Mike DeVries/*The Capital Times*

**I**T TAKES AN AUDACIOUS ART PROJECT to purport to advance social change. Project Girl is an art exhibit brimming with such audacity.

Kelly Parks Snider, a visual artist, and Jane Bartell, a video producer—both of them mothers of teens and tweens—created Project Girl to catalyze adolescent girls to change how they view commercial advertising and contemporary media entertainment.

Bartell describes the purpose of Project Girl as “helping girls identify and prevent commercial advertisers from manipulating their lives through use of popular media, which includes TV, the Internet, movies, magazines, books, and billboards ... Project Girl encourages girls to take back control from the commercial advertisers who are trying to shape and manipulate them.”

Project Girl’s power to spark the kernels of critical awareness in adolescent girls provides important lessons for formal educators about how art can

serve as an agent of personal transformation and social change.

Project Girl is tripartite: a workshop-based interactive art exhibition, a multimedia curriculum, and an interactive website. Reflecting two years of work exploring the effects of contemporary media on young women’s lives and attitudes, Project Girl has attracted the attention of women leaders both locally and nationally. Lt. Gov. Barbara Lawton, speaking at the Project Girl exhibit opening in Madison in March, encouraged young women to see themselves

as connected to a larger context: "There are lots of stereotypes that will follow you as women ... And we have a lot of work to do. And we are doing it and we're going to need you to come up behind us and be right there with us."

The opening also featured a presentation by Lyn Mikel Brown, an advisor on the project and a nationally recognized leader in the field whose works include *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes* (with co-author Sharon Lamb) and *Girl Fighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls*.

In Brown's presentation on media literacy, a video of which now accompanies the exhibit, she impressed upon the young women that they're being sold a bill of goods by most advertisers: "You girls are being marketed an image of power. But it's not real power like the kind of power to change the world. The kind of power they're marketing is the kind of power to choose between different colors of lip gloss, or clothing, or to buy things to look a certain way.

We need you to have real power in the world—the power to change things for the good."

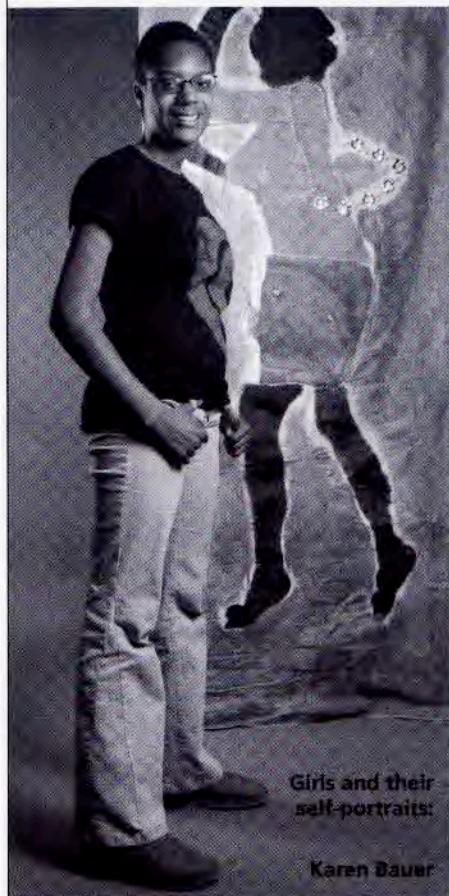
Project Girl is nourishing that power.

## ART AS A TOOL OF ENGAGEMENT

Project Girl advances social change by combining a multidimensional interactive art exhibit with an effective curriculum and interactive website. Together, this provides the middle school participants with tools to better understand the motives of commercial media and to respond to those influences in a healthy way. As education reporter Elissa Gootman noted in a recent series in the *New York Times*, middle school years are in many ways the critical years in transitioning from childhood to maturity (Gootman, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). Project Girl provides provocative messages and challenges not only to adolescent girls, but to all who have the most at stake in seeing

these young women emerge through these years with balanced attitudes toward their bodies, strong relationships with peers and parents, and healthy aspirations toward activism and civic engagement.

The roots of Project Girl were monthly workshops that Parks Snider and Bartell organized throughout 2006. These workshops brought together two dozen middle school students with artists, poets, researchers, and psychologists. Significantly, Parks Snider and Bartell drew young women coming from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, and economic status. Each workshop provided a unique angle to critically examine and respond to images of women in media. These workshops approached the material from multiple angles: students listened, discussed, and created art that was both reflective and expressive of the workshop material. By having the young women work directly with images of women in the media (e.g., digging through magazine ads, watching



commercials) and providing a safe forum for exploring controversial issues (e.g., body image, objectification, glamorized violence against women, stereotypes, and gender definitions). Parks Snider and Bartell cultivated an exhibit and curriculum that is both rich and relevant.

Importantly, the art created by the young women themselves is at the center, not the periphery, of the Project Girl exhibit. The young women who participated in these monthly workshops served as both sounding boards and advisors. As Bartell puts it, they were integral to shaping the message of Project Girl: "They helped us understand if we were treading into touchy territory and allowed us to present information that they'd be receptive to through peer-to-peer teaching. We defused landmines with them."

Working together with the adolescents in these workshops, Parks Snider and Bartell helped the young women explore subtle, powerful phenomena. In no small part, the genius was engaging them without preaching at them. For instance, in one session the students examine brand conditioning. Parks Snider cautions the students, "Pay close attention to advertisements because the messages have become a part of our mental environment. We often take in ads without even realizing it!" Rather than telling them that they're being manipulated, however, Parks Snider just asks the prompting questions ("Who's pressing your buttons? What are some 'wham moments' when you've been violated unexpectedly by a particular ad, and why is reflecting on that important?"). Through the activities of looking at ads the students take responsibility for identifying brand conditioning for themselves.

Project Girl uses multiple strategies to build the skills of critical media literacy. Some are traditional, such as writing poetry. Examples of the students' work sometimes examine doubts and insecurities: "Why can't I be the skinny, tall, beautiful girl that always gets the spotlight?/Why can't I be the bright of the brightest stars in the sparkling summer sky?/Why can't I be

## Real Girls, Real Power

After writing about the way media and marketers have co-opted Girl Power to be the *image* of power—to shop, to make ourselves over, to be sexual objects—it was an honor and a relief to be a small part of Project Girl. Kelly and Jane are living muses, inspiring girls' creativity and imaginations, putting real power back in their hands and minds—the power to create a world that takes them seriously, that reflects their wonderful diversity and celebrates their true potential.

Girls who have real power don't settle for the same old same old; they don't squander it on the mundane; they aren't taken in by the appearance of things. After speaking to a room full of middle school girls and touring the Project Girl exhibit, I felt as if someone had lit a raging bonfire in the midst of dreary sameness. Okay, more like in the midst of pink, glitzy, sexy sameness. These girls, both the artists and the audience, are the girls that corporations spend billions on to foster body consciousness, self-hate, and competition with other girls. Instead they question, challenge lies, open up possibilities, and imagine the world as if it could be otherwise. Thanks to Project Girl, these girls aren't buying. They have better things to do.

By Lyn Mikel Brown, Ed.D. Mikel Brown is author of *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes* and co-creator of Hardy Girls Healthy Women ([www.hghw.org](http://www.hghw.org)).

the lead of the perfects?" (excerpts from Colleen's poem, "Why").

Other examples show the young women celebrating themselves: "My hair is like lapping waves, curling in the spring./My eyes are as dark and beautiful as a dark piece of chocolate./...My smile is as big as a watermelon. As I smile, it reminds me of the Sun smiling at me./As I think of myself, I feel that I'm as strong as a horse./...I love myself as much as I love others" (excerpts from Jasmine's poem, "Song of Myself").

Still others show them finding power in activism: "This emptiness is beautiful; it leaves/you free to create instead of the usual .../everyone telling or showing./You are left to think for yourself, left/to your own uninterrupted creation ... You!" (Madison's poem, untitled).

Other strategies approach the content in a much more technologically savvy manner. One example of this is the video collage work in the exhibit that Parks Snider and Bartell created in collaboration with digital artist Mary Waitrovich. These montages—flashing images of advertising over a soundtrack mix of music and voices of young women—show the genius of art activism, engaging a generation savvy in

information technology by speaking to them via their own medium. Integrating the art of the young women with the professional work of Parks Snider in visual arts and Bartell in video production sets Project Girl apart from other efforts to impact the attitudes and choices of young women.

## ART AS A TOOL OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Participants attending the Project Girl exhibition reflect its initial impact. For instance, Danielle, a middle school student, explained that after attending Project Girl she has started noticing product placement: "Last night I was watching 'American Idol' and I saw Coke. They were drinking out of Coke glasses rather than just normal glasses and I wouldn't have noticed that before."

Rachel, another participant, reflected on the effect of the exhibit in helping young women develop the skills to think independently: "If girls get a message to be themselves, act themselves, and not fall into the media, then the media, they won't be as powerful." Ashley, a third participant, described how the images



Photo by Mary Walthovich  
**Hang Outs: The Mall (2006), Project Girl artists, mixed media.**

of the exhibit stuck with her: "I went home and had a lot of reflection time. Whoa. It's just so different than I thought the media [were] ... The media [aren't] interested in how you feel at all. They just want to make more money and more money, and they don't care what they do to get that!"

One core strength of Project Girl is employing various forms of art to engage students' multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983, 1993). Participants are involved linguistically, visually, kinesthetically, musically, interpersonally, and intrapersonally. The art of the exhibit is multidimensional, weaving together the professional and the personal. As Parks Snider described the power of art as a teaching tool: "Art heightens a level of awareness and transforms people. It educates people, but it doesn't do it in a way where it's talking at you. And I think it's very important, particularly with [middle school] girls, because they're resistant to that sort of education."

A second strength of Project Girl is its focus on connecting with the young women it seeks to impact. Part of this emerged from incorporating the work of the initial middle school students into the art exhibit. This impressed students attending the exhibit, as Danielle reflected: "That was a big thing ... just the regular girls helped with that art

and it was really cool. It looked professional, like it could be in museums."

Additionally, the curriculum workbook (*The Project Girl Workbook: A Guide to Un-Mediafying Your Life*) teaches media messages in a non-threatening, engaging manner. The workbook is a panoply of original art, images, slogans, quotes, and reflections that is at once delightfully droll and profoundly provocative. The interactive website is tailored to appeal to this target audience. With its website component, Project Girl distinguishes itself from an emerging array of innovative sites providing tools for critical media literacy (e.g., [adiosbarbie.com](http://adiosbarbie.com), [about-face.org](http://about-face.org)) by being the product of a collaboration with Project Girl workshop participants who helped design the messages and interactive content. It also keeps art in the forefront as the means to engage and educate.

## A TOOLBOX THAT LASTS

Maya Angelou once said, "Nothing will work unless you do." Project Girl, an innovative approach to educating middle school girls in critical media literacy, works. It works to counterbalance the barrage of objectifying, deprecating images of femininity that assault women on a daily basis. It works to rejuvenate educators and parents alike who are looking for tools to help

them inspire critical reflection on these images. Instead of simply decrying destructive messages about young women in the media, Project Girl does the heavy lifting of providing effective, innovative tools to critique and counter these messages.

Project Girl demonstrates how art helps us plumb the complexities of our world that often elude other lenses. In the words of Lt. Gov. Lawton, "It is a way we can work with ideas that are too difficult sometimes for words, too complex for us to articulate. And so we communicate with each other through art."

Using the arts has proved to be an effective approach to get Project Girl's media literacy train moving down the tracks toward increased awareness and more critical consumption by middle school students. But the power fueling the engine is found in the girls themselves. "Innately at this age, girls are activists," comments Park Snider. "They have gobs of energy. Just give them a cause, ask for their help, give them the guidance and set them up so they're successful, and they can do it. They can make change happen." \*

*Martin Scanlan, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of educational and policy leadership at Marquette University and a professional advisor with Project Girl.*

**To bring Project Girl to your area**, as an exhibition, a workshop, or to incorporate into your program or curriculum, please contact Kelly Parks Snider at [kpsnider@charter.net](mailto:kpsnider@charter.net) or 608/576-2847.

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