



Megan Williams: Helping Girls Change Society

Part of “Making Change Happen: Women Creating a Better Maine”

Written by Bethany Hutchinson

Megan Williams has seen what girls can accomplish when they commit to creating positive change. She “envisions a world in which we celebrate those achievements instead of who wore it best,” as many celebrity magazines would have us do. Six years ago, she began to make this vision a reality while taking a class at Colby College with Professor Lyn Mikel Brown, a well-regarded scholar of girls’ development. As part of an independent study, Williams led a girls’ group for middle schoolers that doubled as a pilot program for Hardy Girls Healthy Women, a nonprofit that Brown created in 2000 along with Karen Heck and Lynn Cole. An extension of Brown’s research and Heck’s and Cole’s experience working with adolescent girls, HGHW aims to help girls in grades 2-12 be their beautiful, strong selves.

Williams, who has grown in her role at HGHW from student volunteer to executive director, says her experience leading the girls’ group was the bridge between theory and practice that affirmed her desire to work with young women. She chose to remain at the organization because it offers girls the opportunity to become involved in their community and to connect with adults and peers who challenge them. Moreover, as a systems-oriented program, Hardy Girls shifts the focus from the individual girl to the culture in which their growing by teaching girls critical thinking and media literacy skills and to ask who benefits from them feeling bad. For instance, girls internalize societal messages about what it means to be feminine and often feel as though something is wrong with them if they don’t fit the

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mold. When this happens, people tend to say that girls just need the self-confidence to rise above Barbie's impossibly perfect appearance. But Hardy Girls says differently. "Instead of placing the onus on the girls to change," Williams explains, "we encourage them to change the culture, to look around and fix society rather than looking inward and fixing themselves."

Williams first witnessed the benefits of HGHW's approach through the experience of twins who were in her girls' group, known as a Girls Coalition Group, and who later joined HGHW's Girls Advisory Board, a program for high schoolers. Initially, the twins didn't know how to effect change, nor did they dream of attending college. Then they saw a t-shirt for sale at Kmart. For boys, it depicted a big grin on a boy's face after he pushes down a girl. The t-shirt caption read "Problem Solved". Along with Hardy Girls' staff and board members, the twins took action, insisting that Kmart remove the shirt from its stores. The twins even called the CEO of Sears Holdings, Kmart's parent company. "The girls were so brave," says Williams. "They could have written, but they chose to speak with the CEO instead, believing it would be more effective." And perhaps it was, since after hearing so many concerns, including the twins', Kmart agreed to stop selling the offensive t-shirt in their stores across the country. Throughout the process and their time with HGHW, the twins learned to use their voices differently. "They gained confidence," Williams says, "and they're now in their second year of college."

Helping girls like the twins realize their ability to make a difference not only in their own lives, but also in their community, is what drives HGHW. With the help of a grant from the Maine Women's Fund, they hope to extend their reach. They plan to bring programming to Maine's rim counties as

well as to Portland and Bangor, and the grant has provided the resources needed for Girls' Advisory Board participants to feature women entrepreneurs in GAB's zine, G-WAVE. Also in the works is an online hub that will offer a one-stop-shop for people and organizations nationwide that aim to support girls. "Such a site," Williams posits, "could provide a platform from which to protest or celebrate matters that affect young women and help Hardy Girls achieve its goals."

For instance, when HGHW learned that spunky, adventurous Dora the Explorer was set to become a fashionable tween living in the big city, they launched their Let's Go: No Makeover for Dora! campaign, joining a growing number of people concerned that this older Dora would lose her moxie. Nearly 15,000 protesters from across the country signed HGHW's petition, prompting Mattel and Nickelodeon to release tween Dora's full image to give people a better idea of who she is. While proud of their accomplishment, Hardy Girls looks forward to using an online resource to amplify the voices talking back to mainstream media's narrow portrayals of young women.

Meanwhile, Hardy Girls will continue to listen to the voices that matter most, measuring the success of their programs through the words of those who attend. When they hear girls say that they "learned to trust other girls" and "that magazine images aren't real" or that they think "people should know that girls can do anything that boys can do," they know they've made a difference.

How are you making a difference? Tell us.

