

Girl authority

A mentoring organization founded in 2000 by a Harvard freshman is making a difference

By Robbie Brown, Globe Correspondent | July 9, 2007

Imagine this scenario, Lindsay Hyde says: It's a rainy day after school. The students are bored. The teacher proposes an extracurricular activity: basketball. The boys dribble, shoot, and laugh. On the sidelines, the girls sit and watch.

Situations like that bother Hyde, the 25-year-old founder and director of the Boston-based non profit Strong Women, Strong Girls. To Hyde, the "basketball scenario" -- an extreme example, she admits -- raises a troubling question about many school programs: What about the girls?

"For girls, it's really important to create a sphere where they feel safe," Hyde says. "That safety allows girls to try new things and take chances that let them become more self-aware and more self-confident. That's really important by the time they reach junior high, when girls tend to fall behind in self-esteem."

To address this concern, Hyde founded SWSG as a freshman at Harvard in 2000. The program partners college women with elementary school girls. It preaches positive female values by highlighting successful women. For instance, in a lesson about science, SWSG girls discuss the career of primatologist Jane Goodall.

SWSG has become one of Boston's fastest-growing nonprofits -- and one of the most lauded. It now has 120 college mentors helping 400 girls in 32 elementary schools in Boston and Pittsburgh. Last month, Hyde received one of the nation's highest service awards, the Samuel S. Beard Award for Greatest Public Service by an Individual 35 or Under. Previous winners include such boldfaced names as Steve Jobs, Lance Armstrong, and Faith Hill.

"When Max Cleland [a US senator from 1997-2003] won the award [in 1977], he didn't have household name recognition. But he became well-known," says Jonathan Peters, director of the Jefferson Awards, which presents the Beard Award. "The 'under 35' winners include a lot of people like Lindsay Hyde who aren't household names but could become nationally known."

The Social Innovation Forum selected SWSG as one of four Boston nonprofits this year to advise and introduce to local philanthropists. "Lindsay has a model that deeply involves both college women and young girls," director Susan Musinsky says. "This is a model that's very transferable to other cities, that could certainly go national."

In some education circles, teachers and parents fret about boys more than girls. After all, boys are twice as likely as girls to be diagnosed with learning disabilities in elementary school, twice as likely to be placed in special-education classes, and significantly less likely to enter college.

But Hyde believes this "boy crisis" has overshadowed an equally bothersome girl crisis. Although boys generally lag behind girls in academics, Hyde says, the opposite is true socially. In junior high, girls suffer a dramatic drop-off in confidence and become more prone to unhealthy eating habits.

The arrest rate for girls in Massachusetts tripled between 1991 and 2001, and continues to rise, according to a 2005 report by the Girls' Coalition of Greater Boston. Director Mary Jo Kane says these statistics prove that girls' needs aren't adequately addressed in school. "Girls' programs are continually marginalized and underfunded," Kane says. "This is a new era for girls. . . . We are coming up on a time when girls are showing how women can lead in entirely new ways."

Growing up in a single-parent household in Miami, Hyde idolized her mother. "My mom cut the grass, paid bills, installed floor tiles. From watching her, it didn't seem like there was anything a woman couldn't do," she says.

At Harvard, Hyde wanted to perform community service work with young girls but did not find an organization that fit her interests. She founded SWSG and attracted dozens of volunteers. SWSG has expanded to Northeastern University, Simmons College, and Boston College .

Simmons senior Katherine Centrella joined as a freshman and will co-direct her chapter next year. "This is not about teaching specific skills, like math," she says. "This is about teaching life skills."

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