



The Vermont Women's Fund

A Component Fund of the Vermont Community Foundation

Philanthropy Inspiring Vermont Women and Girls Since 1995

Fall/Winter2011

Taking Back Girl Power

Padded bras for six year-olds? Dora the Explorer dolls transformed from plucky little adventurer to skinny glam girl? Thongs as "aspirational" items for tweens? According to Dr. Lyn Mikel Brown, co-creator of **Hardy Girls Healthy Women** (HGHW), these items are all part of today's pop culture marketing schemes that tell girls and young women their power lies in choosing to be sexy shoppers, a message that both undermines girls' self-image and at the same time provides a point of active resistance around which girls can organize and build coalitions for change.

Dr. Brown, Professor of Education at Colby College, was recently invited by The Vermont Women's Fund to share this message with VWF grantees and other nonprofits at a day-long seminar. Her presentation drew largely on work she has done over the years with HGHW and her many published works, including *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*, co-authored with Carol Gilligan and *Packaging Girlhood*, co-authored by former Saint Michael's Professor Sharon Lamb.

"Girls have been recast as consumer citizens and their power has been co-opted and taken from them," Brown explained. Rather than learning that they have the power to use their brains, talent and courage to become strong, self-reliant women, today's girls' magazines, TV ads and commercial social networking sites are giving girls the message that they have the power to shop, be sexy and fight with other girls. "Girls have been sold a bill of goods about their power and the ways they can have power in the world. Marketers have recast the conversation around girls' development and girls' citizenship."

"We need to create safe spaces where girls can learn together to exert control over their social environment; recognize cultural obstacles such as sexism, racism and classism; and speak out and resist the pressures that prevent them from becoming strong, healthy women."

Brown went on to explain that on the surface this seems a long way from some of the issues that we're all concerned about like economic security, job readiness and positive relationships, (issues most of the VWF's current grantees are engaged in), but these things are very entwined. With girls being exposed to various kinds of media an average of 10 to 12 hours a day, marketing images have become a huge influence on the ways girls see themselves and plan for their futures.



Dr. Lyn Mikel Brown presenting to nonprofits recently in Montpelier.

Studies by the American Psychological Association found that girls and young women most exposed to this kind of advertising are the ones who struggle with body image, self-esteem and depression. Media saturated teens are more likely to accept sexual harassment and sexual violence as a normal part of a relationship. Girls who see themselves portrayed as consumers learn early on to spend rather than to save and become financially literate and economically secure later in life. In addition, by glorifying the "mean girl" image, advertising creates a culture of unhealthy competition rather than fruitful female friendships and supportive cooperation.

So how do we move beyond this idea of toxic girl power? Rather than focusing on self-esteem and psychological issues as most programs designed to help girls have done over the past 20 years, Brown says, we need to shift the attention from the individual to the social environment—families, schools and community organizations—letting girls discover that it is not they themselves, but rather the culture in which they live that is in need of repair.

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The Vermont Women's Fund harnesses the collective power of giving to promote leadership, equality, economic independence and philanthropy for Vermont women and girls. Our grants are made from an endowment built by gifts of all sizes from Vermonters like you!

Together, in 14 years of grantmaking, we have invested over \$1.2 million in organizations around the state, working to ensure that all women and girls realize their potential and building strong, vibrant communities throughout Vermont.

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VWF Welcomes New Council Members

The Vermont Women's Fund is pleased to welcome the following community members to the 2011-2012 Council.

Brenda Bisbee, North Fayston and South Burlington

Brenda has had a lifelong interest in women's issues. Prior to retiring, she enjoyed a career as an elementary school teacher followed by work at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. Brenda has been active with board and volunteer work for a number of organizations over the years, including Vermont Humanities Council, Vermont Stage, Vermont Works for Women, Planned Parenthood, and Vermont Commission on Women. Family is a focal point of her life, and when not volunteering she attends to a large family with ten grandchildren.



Gretchen Kruesi, Burlington

Gretchen has nearly 10 years of experience working on campaigns, policy, advocacy, marketing and grassroots organizing. Currently, she is the Online Marketing Manager for Chelsea Green Publishing. She began volunteering in high school, focusing on young women's empowerment, advocacy for domestic and sexual assault victims, and access to reproductive rights. She is currently on the board of Vermont Access to Reproductive Freedom. During her free time you'll find her running, hiking, horseback riding, playing disc golf and debating.



Elisabeth Kulas, West Rutland

Elisabeth has worked in the non-profit affordable housing industry in Vermont for 20 years. She is currently the Executive Director of the Housing Trust of Rutland County and also serves as the real estate developer for the organization. She has been active in the State's affordable housing networks, the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition and the Vermont Housing and Conservation Coalition. In her spare time she loves to garden, cook, read and be active with her family and dogs.



Marissa Parisi, Shelburne

Marissa is the Executive Director of Hunger Free Vermont. She is considered an expert in developing sustainable programs, strategic planning, organizational development, and fundraising for nonprofits. Prior to joining Hunger Free, she was the Director of Donor Relations at Planned Parenthood of Northern New England. Marissa is passionate about investing in women as leaders and creating a world where women are equally represented. She enjoys time with her husband and their cats, dog, and a new bee hive.



Sylvia Robison, Burlington

Sylvia has served on a wide variety of nonprofit boards. She is a past Chair of the Vermont Symphony Orchestra Board and currently serves as VSO Governing Board Secretary and Chair of the Governance Committee. She is also past Chair of the Vermont Humanities Council and the State Board of Libraries. Books, history and music are her passions. Sylvia is a founding member of Bella Voce and sings with the VSO Chorus. She received an honorary Doctorate of Letters from Middlebury College in 2000.



Discovering New Opportunities in Summertime Scrubs

By Jocie Mueller—Champlain Valley Area Health Education Center,
Health Careers Program Coordinator

Summertime on the University of Vermont (UVM) campus is a wash of young people enjoying their activity groups in the sunshine. One group however, stands apart as unique. It may be their confidence, or their sense of hope. It could be their unified dedication to helping others. No matter what it is, you will surely spot them in their dark blue scrubs crossing the campus quad with smiles and curiosity.

MedQuest Champlain Valley is a rigorous, week-long, educational program, offered twice each summer by the Champlain Valley Area Health Education Center (AHEC) for incoming high school juniors and seniors.

This residential program is held on the UVM campus, providing students with the opportunity to explore a variety of careers in health care, while gaining comfort in a college environment.

The selection process is discerning—each student must demonstrate academic dedication as well as participate in activities outside of the classroom that promote growth.

While MedQuest is open to both women and men, the strongest candidates and the majority of those selected are consistently young women from a diverse array of backgrounds and communities. Once accepted, applicants are in for a week they will never forget.

Upon arriving, they are welcomed by the program's four energetic assistant directors, all current students in the UVM College of Medicine, who will act as mentors, leaders, and counselors, staying with the participants throughout the week. After a tour of the college campus and introduction to dorm life, the group gathers to work together on team building activities and games in the quad.

The next morning is filled with a visit to Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC) to learn how to access appropriate resources, financial aid, and scholarship money during the challenging college application process. Throughout the day, participants receive lectures and demonstrations by health care professionals and professors on infection control and confidentiality. A hands-on visit to the pathology lab to examine real organs closes the afternoon. After dinner each night, the evening program can range

from workshops on aging and basic medical skills training, to a barbeque and a movie. When the lights finally go out it marks the end of a full day.

One of the greatest opportunities participants have during the week of MedQuest is in visiting the area hospitals. Porter Medical Center, Northwestern Medical Center, and Fletcher Allen Health Care all enthusiastically open their doors and welcome the participants with knowledge, experience and opportunity. During each visit, they receive a tour of the facilities, presentations by human resources and volunteer representatives, and a three hour individualized job

shadow with a health care professional.

At Fletcher Allen, students even get to tour and interact with the Simulation Lab, which contains advanced technological training equipment. Each of the three hospital visits is punctuated by presentations on cultural care, medical ethics, and the array of opportunities within the medical field. The culminating event at the end of the week is a 4 hour

telemedicine surgery, where the students watch live surgery on a huge projected screen, while talking with the surgeon and asking questions via a teleprompter.

At the end of the 2011 sessions, participants were asked to sum up the MedQuest experience in their own words. Some of the resounding replies shared by the young women in the group included: "a fantastic opportunity that opens doors," "enthraling and invigorating," and "an experience of a lifetime." One participant shared, "I truly believe the my MedQuest experience will guide me through my future." Students leave MedQuest with not only their eyes opened to the depth of the world of health care, but also knowing that they have the opportunity to achieve whatever they want within that amazing field.

Champlain Valley AHEC received a \$4,500 grant from the Women's Fund in 2011 to support need-based scholarships for young women interested in MedQuest. For more information, contact Jocie Mueller, Health Careers Program Coordinator, at (802) 527-1474 ext. 214.

—The VWF also provided a similar grant in 2011 for the MedQuest program in Northeastern Vermont—



MedQuest participants at Fletcher Allen Hospital's Simulation Lab.

Notes from the Field

Site visits to see our grantee’s programs in action are an important component of our grantmaking process. They not only help to ensure due diligence on the grants but also allow the VWF to build relationships with our grantees and learn more about the best practices and challenges of their work. Through these visits and conversations our grants become tangible in a new way. Following are some reflections from one of the visits made by VWF staff over the summer months.

June 29, 2011 This morning we met up with the twelve young women participating in The DREAM Program’s current camp session; some of whom will continue on to participate in DREAM’s new Young Women’s Leadership Program. The girls are all teens from low-income backgrounds and represent seven towns across the state from Milton to Bennington. They were spending the morning working at The Farm Between, in Jeffersonville. With good natured direction and humor, Farmer John engaged the girls in a variety of tasks from feeding livestock and weeding to rolling up vast sections of cheesecloth covering the crops. It was a hot day, and the girls worked slowly, laughing, their clothes dusty and fingernails dirty. Many had never been to a farm or worked in a garden. For some, the work was out of their comfort zone and they were hesitant to engage, but the camp councilors were diligent about including every girl. DREAM has had



a partnership with The Farm Between for the past few years, bringing campers there to work once a week throughout the summer. The hands on experience helps build awareness of local food systems, connects them to the things they eat, and offers the chance for them to give back to the community. In return, the Farm provides the camp with some meat and produce through out the season.



Around 11:30 am we all headed back to Camp DREAM headquarters in Fletcher. The camp is on a rustic swath of forest near a pond with a network of footpaths connecting the lean-tos where the girls sleep with the camp kitchen (a portion of which is creatively housed in a converted bus),

privies, and open air pavilion where they gather for meals and activities. The group gathered in the pavilion to discuss the morning’s activities... the challenges, the new experiences, the lessons learned. “It felt good to be productive, to care for things, and the blisters from the hoe are a reminder of our hard work.” “It was fun to work together as a team.” “Everything grows better in the dirt, including us.” They talked about the other activities in their lives that make them feel empowered and healthy—reading, swimming, learning, playing music—and emphasized the importance of cultivating a diverse mental and physical climate in which to grow.

We asked the group why it’s important to have programs like Camp DREAM and what they gain from it. A girl who had been sitting quietly throughout the discussion, intent on weaving colorful threads into a bracelet, raised her hand. “Some of us are just used to the city”, she said. “It’s a chance to get outdoors and learn about nature. I would never have known how to camp or build a tent. I’m more confident now. It feels awesome.” “It’s a chance to get away from all the stress at home,” said another. “It’s in the middle of nowhere, with no worries, and I can just focus on myself.” Other girls started to chime in. They shared that there’s never a dull moment, they’re always learning, pushing themselves to try things they’ve never done before which makes them even more curious about the world. “And the memories we leave with are really good.”

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To see a video from this and other site visits, and read more notes from the field, visit www.vermontwomensfund.org and click “stories.”



One way is to create what Brown calls “hardiness zones,” safe spaces where girls can learn together how to exert control over their social environment; to recognize cultural obstacles such as sexism, racism and classism; and to speak out and resist the pressures that prevent them from becoming strong, healthy women. “The idea of hardiness zones requires us to move away from the purely psychological, away from the focus on self-esteem or depression or eating disorders—those symptoms of individual stress and distress—and to widen our lens, to consider the social and political landscape in which girls come of age,” she explains.

In the grantee seminar, Brown demonstrated how adult leaders can begin to work with—not for—the girls and young women in their VWF funded programs to create hardiness zones in their own communities. The first step is to move from being a mentor to being what Brown calls a “muse.” A mentor’s job is to pass on knowledge or skills that she feels will help the mentee. A muse, on the other hand, is someone who relies on the girl to lead the way, listening to her aspirations and thoughts, drawing out her particular strengths and encouraging her to discover her passion. To be a muse, an adult must be willing to be open, vulnerable and truthful, acknowledging and sharing her own issues around sexuality, body image or competition as they come up. The muse thus models a supportive female friendship, encouraging the girl or young woman to spread her own wings. A muse steps back, trusting in the girl’s self-knowledge, allowing her to discover and act on her own truth and begin to resist unhealthy outside influences.

On an organizational level, muses can create “scaffolding” to provide girls and young women with things like meeting rooms, technical expertise and financial resources so they can begin to act on their own understanding of cultural and social barriers or injustices. Ideally, the adults step back and let the girls take charge, creating their own brand of activism to confront issues they identify in their own communities. Young people are adept at using social networking and online tools to reach and influence other young people, and often their activism can utilize this form of outreach. They learn to be critical thinkers, observing acts of unfairness or discrimination around them and taking action to correct them. They are encouraged and supported to create coalitions, to work together instead of against each other. They also begin to take responsibility for their successes and identify and learn from their mistakes. When girls and young women are allowed to experience this level of collective power, they also experience greater self-esteem and can identify and confront the ways the cultural influences affect their individual lives.

“If we can get girls engaged in changing the social environment, the other stuff comes along,” Brown says from experience. “We need to move beyond those very constrained notions of girl power and the way that girls empowerment can often mean fitting into this toxic culture. We need to emphasize activism rather than focusing on self-empowerment which has been co-opted by advertisers and the media. We need to educate them around the systems of power. It’s not about the individual woman, or girl, it’s about larger social and cultural patterns and structures.”

Does this approach work? Take a look at some great examples of girls’ and young women’s activism online. Check out [Powered By Girl \(PBG\)](http://poweredbygirl.org) to see how girls are resisting, organizing, and defining power for themselves, <http://poweredbygirl.org>. Taking back Girl Power, one media image at a time.

Thank you to former Council member Susan Ritz for contributing this article.

“ What participants are saying... ”

I learned that it’s important to give girls a space to grow into who they want to be. I can allow them more freedom of control in certain areas, and give them the power to explore further in others.

Media really does influence all of us. I plan on asking ‘thinking’ questions when I hear girls talking about pop stars, movies, etc instead of just dismissing it. I will be more curious but cautious.

Differentiating between mentor and muse is critical for the work that I do. It is something that I will impart to my volunteers and consider in my work with these girls.

I loved the resources from SPARKIT and PBG websites. We will be trying out the activities!

I have been even further inspired to collaborate with our young women to create programming for them that does not dance around serious issues but addresses them head-on in.

The Vermont Women’s Fund views training and collaboration as a vital resource for the nonprofit community, and looks forward to offering additional opportunities in the future.



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