

RESCUE OPERATION

NEW "SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP"
ARRIVES IN PHOENIX TO
HELP AT-RISK GIRLS

for Girls

By Kevin Sheh

Photography by Mark W. Lipczynski

Three years ago, Yvonne Watterson arrived as principal of Phoenix's GateWay Early College High School to find critically low attendance and graduation rates hovering at 50 percent. Students had few family role models for completing—or continuing onward—in school. "We have young women in poor areas...when you are immersed in poverty, you're not in a position to make social change—for yourself or others," Watterson says.

Facing a student population labeled "at-risk," Watterson and school administrators launched an Early College program designed to offer students a seamless transition between high school and college, allowing them to earn both a high school diploma and an associates degree within five years.

Still, something was missing—the girls needed to see a tangible pathway between the experiences in their neighborhood today and a productive future where they were connected to the rest of society.

Watterson envisioned a program that brought her girls face-to-face with successful women—role models who could show the girls how they could make an impact in their community.

SCHOOL BECOMES RELEVANT

A Web search led Watterson to discover Girls For A Change, a San Jose-based nonprofit that uses the social entrepreneurship model of bringing alienated girls together with career women to demonstrate pathways to success. Since 2000, the grass-roots program has helped 4,500 girls achieve goals they set for themselves.

The formula is simple: "Girl Action Teams" of five to 15 girls are formed at the neediest of schools. These teams, led by one or

two specially trained mentors—typically successful women—identify projects within the community the girls want to enact. Then the mentors help the girls accomplish the projects.

"The girls pick the issues—then go out and fix them," says Niko Clifford, who, along with founder Whitney Smith, serve as co-chief executive officers of Girls For A Change, which recently selected Phoenix as the first community to expand its programs outside of California.

It's not just about girls escaping their poverty-stricken communities, Clifford says; it's about girls *changing* their poverty stricken communities.

"Suddenly, school is relevant...If you give opportunity and support, the girls will blossom," she says.

Last month, Eleanor Rouse was introduced as Girls For A Change's new ventures director in Phoenix, which is the first stop in the organization's plan to spread its social entrepreneurship model across the country.

'THAT'S WHY THIS WORKS'

Karla, a senior at GateWay's Early College High School, couldn't speak English three years ago when she immigrated to



Girls For A Change New Ventures Director Eleanor Rouse, center, is flanked by GateWay Early College High School Principal Yvonne Watterson and staff member Rita Anita Linger.

Phoenix from Mexico City. She arrived in a Phoenix neighborhood she says is unclean and unsafe.

She has fought hard to learn the language and earn enough credits to graduate and move on to college. However, the neighborhood around her has stayed the same. "A lot of people here don't think you can really make a difference," she says. "They say, 'What's the point?'"

Since the arrival of Girls For A Change, Karla has been identified as one of the charter members of the Girl Action Teams that will be formed in 20 Phoenix-area schools—10 high schools and 10 middle schools.

Already, Karla and other girls have identified neighborhood problems they want to solve. Karla, for instance, wants to clean up her neighborhood and take steps to make the area safer for residents. Two women—volunteers from Phoenix's business community—will be trained to

help Karla and the other girls on the team to realize their goals.

"It's exciting—for the first time, we're realizing we can make a difference," Karla says. "You grow because you start to be more confident. You think, 'I can do something with my life.'"

Clifford, who estimates the free after-school program will cost \$200,000 to launch and as much as \$300,000 to maintain, says foundations, corporations and individuals provide funding to Girls For A Change. Organizers hope to serve 150 girls here this year and 500-600 by 2007.

The funding pays for mentor training and program costs. "Training the coaches is so important," Clifford says. "The girls are really in charge. Our women volunteers are typically very successful—but their job here is to guide the girls. Our role is to empower the girls versus lead them. That's how they learn..."

"That's why this works."

BECOME A MENTOR

GIFT, Girls For a Change, the Boys & Girls Club and the Greater Phoenix Youth at Risk are among the many area organizations that serve girls looking for quality mentors.

- **Girls For A Change**

Eleanor Rouse, New Ventures Director
(602) 677-9428, eleanor@girlsforachange.org

- **Greater Phoenix Youth At Risk**

Linda Lyman, Executive Director
(602) 258-1012, www.phoenixyouthatrisk.org

- **Growth Improvement for Female Teens**

Kristen Bradfield, CEO
(602) 466-2613, azgift@excite.com

- **Boys and Girls Club of Greater Phoenix**

(602) 954-8182, www.bgclubs-phx.org