



Girl power for change

Non-profit dares teens to make a difference

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Karla Bocardo was always a shy kid, certainly not the kind to take up with an organization that wants to change the world.

But she did, and the non-profit Girls for a Change helped transform the reserved teen. Today, she's a college student with dreams of a career in marketing, the confidence to speak at public events and the desire to help other girls effect social change.

"They encourage you to do something different with your life," said Bocardo, 22. "They really encourage you to be someone better."

Girls for a Change, which started in California in 2000, focuses on teaching girls about social change and how to help solve problems in their communities. Along the way, officials hope, the girls build skills like critical thinking, boost their self-esteem, gain an appreciation for their teammates' varied backgrounds and get exposure to professional women and occupations they might not have known otherwise.

The non-profit group offered a shortened pilot program in Phoenix last year, pairing about 100 girls with 20 women coaches. Now into its first full year here, the program has grown to more than 250 girls and 44 coaches, who are professional women, retirees and stay-at-home moms. There are "girl action teams," made up of 10 to 15 girls, in middle schools, high schools, community centers and elsewhere.

Before tackling community projects, the girls take part in team-building exercises, learn about social change and talk about what makes them angry. The latter usually becomes a passionate exchange about issues like animal abuse, homelessness and gang violence, said Arizona's executive director, Alexandra Zavala.

"They get so riled up. It's so amazing to see them get so passionate," Zavala said. "They have the power to create change."

Once a team settles on a community problem, it's up to the girls to create a solution, raise money, contact the necessary officials and do whatever else is needed.

The organization has a golden rule: "We never tell them 'no.' These girls hear 'no' all the time," Zavala said.

So even if they want to tackle the war in Iraq, coaches will suggest something like a letter-writing campaign to lawmakers.

Last year's pilot program was too short to produce major projects. But one team, concerned about girls' negative body images, had time to create bumper stickers bearing positive messages that they could distribute to classmates.

This year's teams will have until May to choose projects and put a solution in place.

The organization's Phoenix office hopes to double the number of girls it can serve next year, Zavala said. Nationally, the organization will grow thanks to a large grant to expand to four other cities in the next two years.

Bocardo, who was part of the Phoenix pilot program, is now a member of the organization's steering committee. A sophomore at Gateway Community College, she wants to transfer to Arizona State University.

Bocardo said Girls for a Change gave her a safe space to meet girls and women from different backgrounds, learn how to speak her mind and discover that change is possible - whether in her own life or in the world around her. This month she planned to speak at an event honoring Martin Luther King Jr.

Before joining Girls for a Change, Bocardo never imagined doing that.

"Why would they want to hear my story, it's not important," she would have believed. "Now I know that's not true."