

Member Spotlight: Girls Incorporated of the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area

BY COREY JENKINS SCHAUT

After 27 years in education, it takes a lot to surprise Denese Lombardi.

But at last spring's Girls Inc. National Luncheon at the Capital Hilton, one of the middle-school-aged participants in the program did just that.

It started with a question.

"Is the White House near here?" the young woman asked Lombardi, the Washington, D.C. affiliate's executive director.

It wasn't this question that surprised her as much as the one that followed it: "Are we allowed to go there?"

For many Girls Inc. participants, Lombardi noted, leaving their area of the city — most often East of the Anacostia River in Southeast Washington — is a rarity. What is more common for them is a lack of access to needed resources and a sense of inadequacy that pervades much of their lives.

How did Lombardi respond to the young woman about visiting the White House?

"Those people work for you. You absolutely have the right to go there," she said. She then took several program participants on a walking tour around the National Mall to see a part of their hometown that they had never visited.

"They have been shut out for so long that, after awhile, these kids don't believe they have a right to access," Lombardi notes.

Girls Inc. of the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area (Girls Inc. WDCMA) works to change this for girls ages of 6 to 18 in the National Capital Region. The organization is an affiliate of the national nonprofit Girls Incorporated, which has 80 affiliates in the United States and Canada.

The mission of the national organization and its affiliates is to inspire girls to be strong, smart, and bold. Lombardi said the organization focuses on young women because they believe that they

face a different set of pressures than their male peers do. The local affiliate pays annual dues to the national organization, which gives it access to the national Girls Inc. program curriculum, among other resources.

All Girls Inc. programs are based on the organization's national Girls Bill of Rights. This edict covers such areas as resisting gender stereotypes, the freedom of self-expression, positive body image, career advancement, and issues of mental and physical safety.

The D.C.-area affiliate incorporated in 2004 through the efforts of a volunteer steering committee. Lombardi, who was also part of the founding group, is the first executive director of the affiliate. This year, Girls Inc. WDCMA served more than 200 girls in Wards 1, 7, and 8 of the city.

The D.C. affiliate offers three of the eight national Girls Inc. identity programs. These programs include "Will/Won't Power," which is part of the Girls Inc. Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy® program; Project BOLD®, a self-defense and self-esteem program to help girls learn to live safer lives and prevent violence; and the Girls Inc. Economic Literacy® program, which includes the one-day seminar "Money Talks" where girls attend a day-long seminar with parents or guardians to discuss how money works in the greater marketplace as well as in their own families.

Most programs are 8 to 10 weeks long. Lombardi is seeking funding to add two more programs from the national curriculum — Girls Inc. Operation SMART®, which encourages girls' interest in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; and Girls Inc. Media Literacy®, which encourages girls to think critically about media messages and their effects.

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Streets, NW. This arts program for cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers was doing great work, but needed to create a street presence in their first floor lobby to preview what was happening upstairs — a holistic, whole-world approach to healing. How to go about it?

Architects Michael Hall, AIA, and Anne Crowley of Studio Crowley Hall wanted to volunteer their time and talents with a CDS program, and here was a perfect match. Their firm is very interested in the healing arts, and Studio Crowley Hall took this opportunity to give back by designing plans for the organization's lobby renovation, complete with an elevator.

According to Hall, "This presented us with a chance to combine our design skills and interest in a holistic approach to healing with an organization truly dedicated to helping others."

Ballou Senior High School in Southeast Washington was a part of another CDS project. Teachers had nowhere to go between classes, save for an old holding room used for vending machines and copiers. CDS and the 21st Century Fund, a private advocacy fund, teamed up to get the project rolling. Jim Greenwall, AIA, of Hickok Cole Architects provided all the plans to transform this room into a comfortable teachers' lounge, complete with space to work, prepare lessons, grade papers, eat, and relax between classes.

In some cases, the architects and firms that volunteer for these projects go on to build them. This happened with last year's Capitol Hill Libraries Project, where several firms providing pro bono designs for new elementary and middle school libraries and also built the new facilities, pro bono. In other instances, the architects go on to other CDS projects — once again offering pro bono planning, zoning, and design assistance.

In its 15 years, CDS has jumpstarted more than 175 projects for Washington-area nonprofits, with more to come.

Lyn Schwartz is the special events manager of the Washington Chapter of The American Institute of Architects (AIA/DC). Community Design Service is a project of the Washington Architectural Foundation, which is a subsidiary of AIA/DC. For more information, visit their Web site at www.wafonline.org. ☺

Are you a Center member? Do you have good news to share with other DC-area nonprofits? Send your announcements (including awards, promotions, and transitions) to jeffk@nonprofitadvancement.org.

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Lombardi observes that girls in the D.C. region have some special challenges that the affiliate will focus on in upcoming programs. She noted that a recent study found that youth in the District of Columbia were among the most overweight in the nation. Prior to the study's release, Girls Inc. WDCMA was already working on this issue in their special summer program "Healthy, Wealthy & Safe," which addressed issues of mental, physical, and financial wellness with young women.

Another special challenge Lombardi sees is the substantial pressure on young women to be "perfect" — to be physically fit, do well in school, and take on significant caretaking roles in their families. Lombardi cited a recent study by Girls Inc. titled "The Super Girl Dilemma," which studied girls in grades three to 12. Three-quarters of high school girls in the study stated that they are under a lot of pressure to please everyone. At the same time, only one in ten of the girls surveyed reported that they could name three adults they could go to if they had a problem.

"We need to teach these girls to love yourself and to take care of yourself," said Lombardi.

Girls Inc. WDCMA plans to expand its services into Ward 4 within the next year. While the organization is currently only serving students in the District, Lombardi hopes to expand programs to close-in suburbs in Northern Virginia and Maryland. She also wants to offer programs to broader age groups, including elementary and high school girls. She noted that the organization is planning to host a Girls Summit next year to discuss issues affecting girls in our region.

As a part of its five-year strategic business plan, the D.C. affiliate is also planning to build a center to house its operations and offer on-site programs. The organization has architectural plans for the site and is in the planning stages of a capital campaign to fund construction.

Lombardi encourages community participation in Girls Inc. programs, whether through donating or volunteering time.

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To learn more about Girls Inc. of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Area, visit www.girlsincdc.org or call 202.296.0613. ☺