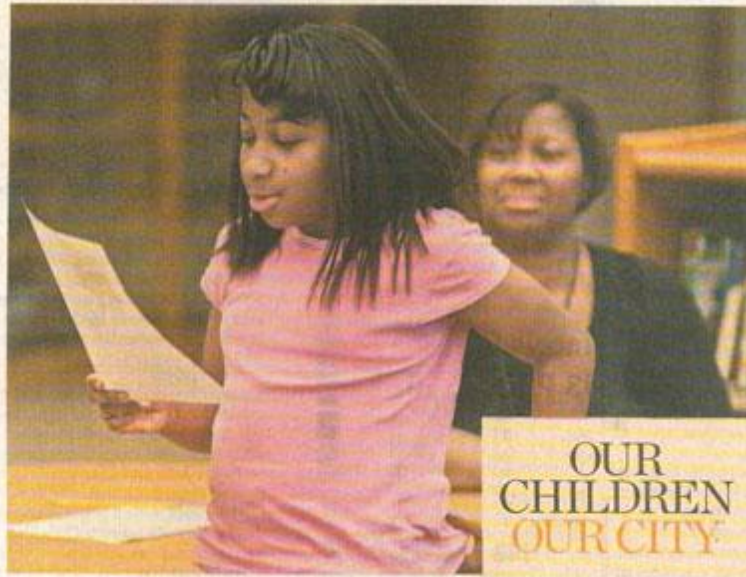


Metro+State

Cautionary measures

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ROBERT SCHEER / The Star

River Bosley, 9, tells how she's strong, smart and bold, as her mom, Kay Bosley, listens during a Girls Inc. program about redefining beauty. The session was Nov. 29 at Brookview Elementary.

BOOSTING SELF-ESTEEM

Girls Inc. helps young women learn how to believe in themselves

By T.J. Banes
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Using colored markers, River Bosley, 9, writes on a white balloon the things she doesn't like about herself: "My hair is too short." "I have too many scars." "I wear old clothes."

Then she takes a pin and eagerly pricks the balloon. Pop goes the negative.

Now comes the positive.

She stands before a classroom of a dozen other Warren Township third- and fourth-grade girls and reads a commercial she wrote about her strengths: "I'm strong because I work hard. I'm smart because I do well in school. I'm bold because I take risks."

The message hits its mark. For six weeks, volunteer facilitator Christen Peterson has met with the girls here at Brookview Elementary in a program titled "Redefining Beauty." The after-school offering by Girls Incorporated of Greater Indianapolis emphasizes "strong, smart and bold."

"Redefining Beauty" is one of more than 200 programs provided by Girls Inc., a nonprofit organization that collaborates with community organizations that provide space for a girl-focused curriculum presented by volunteer facilitators. Its programs serve nearly 3,000 girls and young women ages 6-18 in Indianapolis

Public Schools and Marion County township districts as well as Hendricks County.

Education experts agree that such programs can be essential in overcoming issues such as low self-worth and lack of confidence — characteristics that can keep children, especially girls, from achieving education goals, or even

prevent them from thinking such goals are attainable.

The roughly 150 volunteers for Girls Inc. blanket area schools, providing age-appropriate messages about "Healthy Relationships," "College and Career Planning" and "Girl Empowerment."

The programs, which meet both during and after school, include discussions about topics such as conflict resolution, delaying sexual activity and self-esteem.

"Is it more important to have really nice hair or to be beautiful on the inside?" asks Peterson. "Who are your role models?"

The girls ponder the questions. Hands shoot up.

"I look up to (teen actress) Selena Gomez because she works hard and donates money to Africa," says Baijing Zinnerman, 8, who hopes to become a pediatrician.

The hourlong activity ends with an "appreciation ceremony," where the girls write on paper flower petals something they ad-



After writing negative thoughts about their bodies on balloons, girls symbolically destroy those thoughts by popping the balloons.

Girls Inc.

» Lessons are carrying over to home life, says one mom.

From B1

mire about each of their peers.

"It makes me feel good," River said, "to know that others think I'm special."

River's mom, Kay Bosley, is a big supporter of the program.

"This gives her a place to belong and feel included," said Bosley, who has a 7-year-old who attended a Girls Inc. program.

Also important, Bosley said, is that the lessons learned at school carry over into the girls' home life.

"I've heard them talk about bullying and breathing deep to pause and control their behavior," she said. "They talk a lot about beauty and confidence. It's helped me because it enhances and enforces the messages I've been talking about."

Founded in 1969 by three Indianapolis mothers, Girls Inc. started with two sites — Fountain Square and Meridian-Kessler. In the 1980s, Lilly Endowment partnered with the Fleischman Foundation to fund a long-range strategic plan for Girls Clubs of Marion County.

Now in its 40th year, Girls Inc. has expanded to an outreach model that takes programming from two locations to various schools and community centers. The new model includes 50 partnerships, including 15 neighborhoods in greater Indianapolis.

"When you look at the issues that girls face — bullying, aggression, body image — it has nothing to do with family income," said Patricia Watchel, president and CEO of Girls Inc. "Our goal is to empower all girls and to give them good information to become a positive influence on their community."

The program starts in elementary school and feeds into middle schools.

"When you look at youth development," Watchel said, "you have all

these different components and organizations with various expertise. We don't want to duplicate other programming. Our expertise is girls."

Twins Jade and Divanna Eckels, 14, started their freshman year at Pike High School with a boost of confidence after attending a Girls Inc. summer program on "Body Image." They learned that you don't have to look and act like an actress to be beautiful.

"I've always been pretty shy," Jade said, "and I thought it was important to hear about body image and how powerful the media is in dictating how we view ourselves."

"It was important for me to hear that girls should not define who they are based on other people's opinions. We should not be afraid to express ourselves and be different. It really helped me make the transition to high school."

The program, along with the exposure to adult role models, has resulted in an increase in attendance and behavior changes, Watchel said, that help the girls focus more on academics and less on the exterior challenges.

The focus is to reinforce some of the programs in place by such organizations as the Girl Scouts and YMCA, Watchel said. The primary goal of Girls Inc. is to give girls a safe place to be heard.

At IPS School 56, parent liaison Maria Wright works with organizations such as 100 Black Men, providing mentoring programs to keep boys in school.

But Wright saw girls falling through the cracks and parents who needed support with issues outside the classroom.

The school — 100 percent of its students receive free or reduced-price lunches — recently received part of a \$2.5 million federal grant to become a Full-Service Community School. Girls Inc. programming is part of its services. Other offerings include parent leadership, family literacy and mentoring programs for youth.

HOW TO VOLUNTEER

Girls Inc. relies on volunteers to facilitate programs. Many volunteers are working women, and some are moms.

To make the volunteer opportunities manageable, Girls Inc. provides a one-day, five-hour training session. Programs meet throughout the week, so volunteers can choose a day and time that works best in their schedules. Each program lasts six weeks. Two volunteers work together per program and are provided a messenger bag that includes all materials needed.

For more information about volunteering, call Mollie Hicks at (317) 522-2608 or log onto www.girlsincindy.org.

— T.J. Banes

"This is a high-risk neighborhood, and this is why United Way chose us for one of the sites for the Girls Inc. 'Work it Out' program that meets during school hours," said Wright.

"It is an important component to our programming, especially with sixth-grade girls," she said. "They were really having problems with self-esteem, and it was turning into an issue where they were really mean to each other."

"They needed a non-threatening environment where they could talk openly about issues and learn about accepting each other."

Nashia Abdul Aleem, who is the mother of two girls — one a fifth-grader at IPS School 56 and another an eighth-grader at Crispus Attucks Medical Magnet High School — grew up in the Martindale-Brightwood neighborhood and recalls the constant fights and bullying on the bus.

"I'm grateful that there is a program that helps girls work through these issues in a positive way," said Abdul Aleem. "It's important for girls to know that a man won't necessarily sweep you off your feet."

"You have to set goals, stay focused on your future and let Prince Charming fall into your plan. It's not a fairy tale; it's reality. That's what they learn in these programs."

★ Call Star reporter T.J. Banes at (317) 444-6815.