

THEory into ACTION

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Girl Power! Two Agencies Committed to Change for at Risk Girls through Empowerment and Education

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From the lens of a Community Psychologist, individuals must be committed to empowering others and implementing change in order to effectively impact the communities in which they serve. Change may come in a myriad of ways, ranging from primary prevention services to tertiary intervention programs. Empowerment strategies and education play critical roles in effectively implementing change. According to Page and Czuba, “**Empowerment** is a process that challenges our assumptions about the way things are and can be. It challenges our basic assumptions about power, helping, achieving, and succeeding (1999, p. 1).”

Rappoport (1984) has noted that it is easy to define empowerment by its absence but difficult to define in action as it takes on different forms in different people and contexts. Bernada Baker and Kisha Robert’s commitment to serving as the change they wish to see in the world is a noteworthy example of **empowerment in action**. Both Baker and Roberts have a passion for working with at risk girls from disenfranchised communities. For them, empowerment in action takes the form of serving as leaders in their communities by providing education and empowerment to help at risk girls to excel academically and to not become victims of the perils of society. Roberts is the Founder of Social Butterfly Foundation (www.socialbfly.org), a Rites of Passage and mentoring program that teaches adolescent girls lessons in womanhood in an attempt to promote healthy decision making. Baker is the Founder

of The Princess within Foundation (www.theprincesswithin.org), a self esteem and mentoring program that provides literacy initiatives and leadership development programs for at risk girls.

The girls who come through SOCIAL Butterfly Foundation (SBF) are referred by judges, probation officer, social workers, and parents. SBF works to create a sense of community among the girls who participate in the program as well as women in their community by offering community service in the areas of HIV/AIDS, breast cancer awareness and teen dating violence to name few. There is a focus on ensuring the girls complete the program with a sense of ownership so that they are able to replicate the mentoring services that were offered to them. The success of the program is measured by individual needs. SBF has been in existence for three years. Of the 28 girls who have completed the program, 100% have graduate from high school (much higher than the community average), 10 girls are in college, only two girls have recidivated and only one has had a baby. SBF does not simply focus on this crisis moment, they are forwarding thinking. They have awarded four scholarships for college application fees to girls who have completed the program with the belief that it is important to make sure that a girl can not only go to college but have the means to apply to college.

The Princess within Foundation works with a myriad of girls from disenfranchised communities. Most of the girls come from single parent families. A large portion of the girls have absentee fathers and as a result they are forced to contend with issues that include but are not limited to rejection, abandonment, lack of self-esteem and self-worth and a difficulty understanding their worth and value from a male's perspective (often leading them to objectify themselves). The girls are challenged to confront the dysfunctional dynamics of their environments on a day to day basis. The Princess within Foundation works to provide at risk girls with wrap around services that provide access to positive role models, community support

programs and academic services in an effort to stay focused on achieving their goals and not becoming victims of their environments which all too often includes teenage pregnancy and gang violence. The Princess within Foundation is intentional about providing cultural enrichment programs for girls to not only keep them busy, but also to provide exposure to various opportunities outside of their neighborhoods. Every ounce of prevention and intervention helps to fight the problems that the girls endure on a regular basis. The Princess within Foundation has a proven track record of success for empowering girls to excel academically and to make their dreams a reality. Ninety eight percent of 75 the girls who have completed the program have graduated from high school and 97% of the girls are enrolled in college, two of the college graduates have went on to pursue graduate degrees. Five hundred girls have participated in various field trips and empowerment conferences focusing on self-esteem, self-empowerment development strategies including, but not limited to, financial literacy/youth entrepreneurship training, and time management skills building. Examples of these events include 70 girls from Ivy Prep Charter School in Georgia attending the Presidential Inauguration in 2009 and 10 girls attending an empowerment workshop retreat to Puerto Rico in January 2011.

Educating and empowering others requires hard work and a commitment to the process of change. It may not initially appear to be beneficial, it is often a lengthy process, but recognizing that there is a reward in the process of serving, educating and empowering others is priceless.

This is part of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.