



Busting Barbie and Other Myths

By MINDY FAVREAU

A six-foot-tall cutout of an impossibly shapely woman—what a Barbie doll would look like if she were life size: 101 pounds, with a 39-inch bust, 19-inch waist, and 33-inch hips—stands in the office of Hardy Girls Healthy Women in downtown Waterville. Next to her stands a cut out of the average woman: five-feet four-inches tall and 145 pounds, with a 36-inch bust, 31-inch waist, and 42-inch hips. This one is covered with Polaroids of real girls and women. A sign on the wall reads: “If Barbie were real, she wouldn’t be able to stand up!”

While many people now know that Barbie presents an unreachable beauty ideal, there are many other myths about girls that Hardy Girls Healthy Women confronts every day. Through a variety of programs and resources, the nonprofit organization empowers girls to create safe, supportive environments where they can be themselves.

“There’s this horrible pressure to be the perfect super girl,” says executive director Megan Williams. “Girls need to hear that there’s no such thing, and that they’re okay the way they are.”

It’s not an easy message to spread. That’s why the organization strives to create “hardiness zones,” places where girls can feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment.

“Girls don’t grow up in a vacuum,” Williams says. “They’re influenced by their social and cultural contexts. We’re focused on changing the culture and giving girls the tools to be agents of change in their own community and schools.”

Hardy Girls began in 1999 as an annual conference for fifth to eighth graders called Girls Unlimited!. After two successful conferences, Lyn Mikel Brown, Karen Heck, and Lynn Cole decided to start a non-profit to offer programs and resources for girls year-round.

Brown, a professor at Colby College, has researched and written about the development of young women for 15 years. “There’s too much blaming of girls,” she says. “People focus on one or two issues, like self-esteem, body image, eating disorders, or depression. But we felt that the issue is the wider culture and these messages that affect their self-esteem. We wanted to get at the bigger issues.”

To help girls talk about these bigger issues, Hardy Girls developed a curriculum of Girls’ Coalition Groups for middle schoolers. In these groups, topics range from family and friend issues to body image and sexual harassment to ways to make their schools and communities safer.

“It’s very empowering for these girls to work together in the coalition to affect change,” Williams says. “With all the media messages about girls be-

ing mean and catty, girls are just dying for the opportunity to all work together. These groups have filled a major void in education. It’s just amazing to see what a difference it makes in their lives.”

Hardy Girls also offers an “Adventure Girls” program for girls in elementary school and an advisory board for those of high school age.

The organization’s most recent efforts have focused on the issue of harassment against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. Studies find that lesbian and gay youth are two to six times more likely to attempt suicide than other youths, making homophobic harassment a growing problem.

“No one’s talking about it,” Brown says. “More obvious kinds of bullying are stopped, but no one’s having a real deep conversation about the implications of this, or the impact it has on kids who are gay or who are perceived to be gay.”

In 2005 Hardy Girls teamed up with Greater Waterville’s Communities for Children and Youth to stage *Ugly Ducklings*, a play by Maine playwright Carolyn Gage about harassment and homophobia at a girls’ camp. Hardy Girls created a documentary that features scenes from the play and the actresses’ stories of their own experiences with gender identity. Along with the film, they developed a community action kit to help schools recognize and talk about these issues.

The documentary won the 2006 Groundbreaking Activist Leader (GAL) Award at the Maine International Film Festival, and it has been shown at film festivals in New York City, Ontario, and Torino, Italy.

Through the *Ugly Ducklings* documentary and other resources, Hardy Girls hopes to continue expanding its message. “Girls need to see their own power in the world,” Williams says. “We’re not changing girls—we’re changing the culture, and giving them the tools to make change.” *



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