

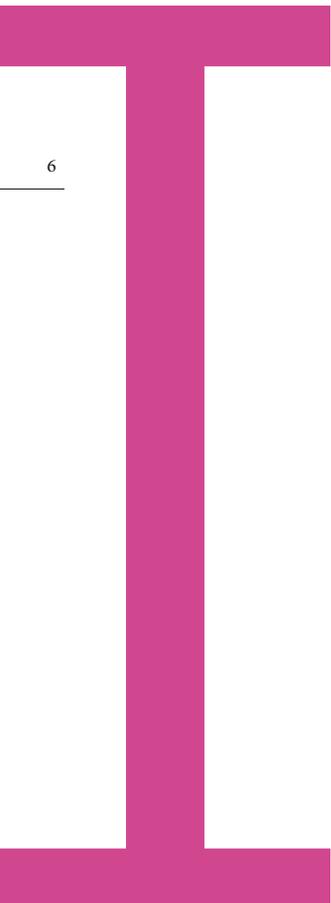
# GIRL POWER

AFTER YEARS OF FUNDING VARIOUS PROGRAMS TO HELP GIRLS NAVIGATE ADOLESCENCE AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD, HEINZ ENDOWMENTS STAFF HONED A STRATEGY THAT FOCUSES ON AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL. THE RECALCULATION TO GO DEEP RATHER THAN BROAD HAS THE POTENTIAL TO STOP PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY START AND TO PLANT SEEDS OF SUCCESS WHEN THE GIRLS ARE MOST RECEPTIVE.

BY LEAH SAMUEL  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ALTDORFER



The challenges facing young girls don't go away during the summer months. Gwen's Girls' Camp Destiny provides an alternative to weeks of unstructured time when school is out, empowering girls like 13-year-old Rayquel Stevenson, above, to reach their potential — with a heavy dose of Kennywood and other fun.



t's late winter, and 40 adolescent girls, most of whom are African American, gather at Chatham University on a chilly weekend morning for the YWCA Greater Pittsburgh's Saturday Academy.

In one classroom, the desks are pushed aside toward the walls. A dozen girls spread out in the open space, their sneakers and boots squeaking across the floor. Each then balances awkwardly on one foot, lifting her arms up high, posing as a wobbly, giggly tree. The group had watched and discussed a brief film about stress, and students from the college are now showing the girls how yoga can help relieve tension.

"That part is good for me because I have anxiety on tests," says 12-year-old Jalaya Sudduth. "I can study, do homework and recite it all back to you, but when it's time to take a test—whoa!"

Seventh-grader Hunter Harper says the yoga helps her, too. "I know I have anger issues," she acknowledges, a bit sheepishly, "and I don't like to be that way."

A participant in Saturday Academy for the past two years, Hunter enjoys the program's focus on science and math, since she is considering teaching math as a career.

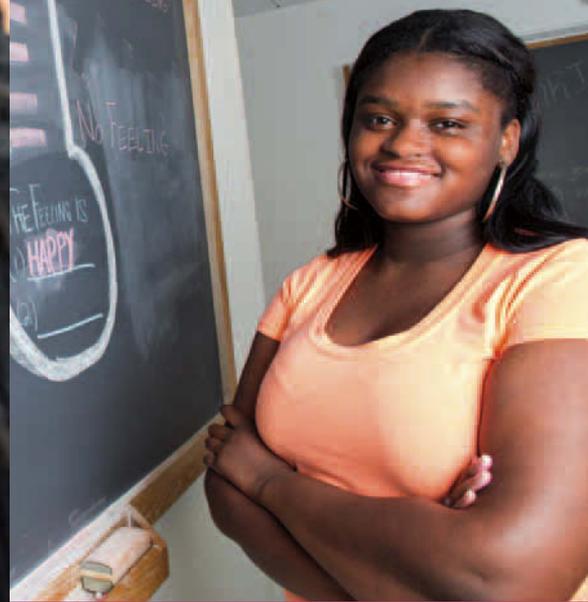
"It's my favorite subject," she says. "So I like that we get help with it."

In another classroom, girls sit at long tables passing around bottles of clear nail polish. But it's time for physics, not pedicures. The girls discuss light reflection and refraction as they gently place small patches of black paper into pans of water. Each opens a bottle and holds the brush over her pan until a single drop of polish lands on the floating paper, quickly spreading and drying into an iridescent rainbow.

The Saturday Academy is part of STEM—Science Technology Engineering Math—Stars, which is a collaborative project of the local YWCA's TechGYRLS initiative and the Carnegie Science Center's GEMS—Girls Engaged in Math and Science—program. The academy not only aims to assist girls with their academic performance, but also to guide them in expanding their expectations for the future. It introduces girls to science and technology, encourages them toward college studies and careers in those fields, and helps them develop coping skills for everyday life.

"We teach the girls how to leverage their strengths," says Alexis Howard, YWCA's teen services director. "We encourage discussion and hand-on activities, and incorporating what they learn into their lives."

For the past 20 years, The Heinz Endowments' Children, Youth & Families Program has helped groups like the YWCA that advocate



These young women — Mikayla Woods, above, and Hunter Harper, left — spent weekend mornings this year exploring science and math through lab experiments and craft projects with the YWCA Greater Pittsburgh's Saturday Academy. Physics and geometry lessons were interspersed with group activities about stress management and conflict resolution. Helping girls like seventh-graders Loren Burke, Tekenna Carter and Rylee Socolove, left to right below, to cope with real-world problems is also the focus of the Gwen's Girls program based in Pittsburgh's North Side.



"I've learned if you put your mind to it, you can do it."

LOREN BURKE, 13  
SEVENTH GRADE  
CURRENT CAREER GOAL:  
HIP-HOP DANCER



"I'm prepared because I used to be shy, but I'm not shy anymore."

TEKENNA CARTER, 12  
SEVENTH GRADE  
CURRENT CAREER GOAL:  
DOCTOR OR LAWYER



"If I make a mistake... I will remember it [now] before doing it again."

JORDAN ROUSE, 12  
SEVENTH GRADE  
CURRENT CAREER GOAL:  
R&B AND HIP-HOP SINGER



## "I ASPIRE"

The girls above are looking forward to the years ahead, though they may settle into adult careers that are different from the ones they're considering now. They all agree that Gwen's Girls, a program founded by the late Gwen Elliott, a retired Pittsburgh Police commander, has helped them to be more disciplined and focused in school and in life. As seventh-grader Rylee Socolove put it, "[The program] shows you the pros and cons about your future. It leads you in the right direction."

for girls to establish and build their programs. Various initiatives show girls how to maintain their overall well-being, evaluate life options and set goals. Several also aid young women in avoiding or coping with struggles, such as teen pregnancy, that can derail them in pursuing their objectives.

But after reviewing grantmaking in this area—its accomplishments and its challenges—staff decided to step up the foundation's efforts to help middle school girls, resulting in a program investment of \$820,000 since 2012. The focus also has been on reaching African American girls, who face race- and gender-driven needs and challenges that are especially acute.

"Middle school is a time when girls are beginning to make independent decisions, and the importance of identity increases," says Carmen Anderson, senior program officer for Children, Youth & Families at the Endowments. "This emphasis is less of a new

grantmaking agenda and more of a fine-tuning of a specific prevention strategy."

CY&F Senior Director Marge Petruska explains that "there was not one glaring clarion call" leading to the decision to direct funding to programs for middle school girls. Instead, after years of supporting initiatives designed to address a variety of concerns affecting girls and young women, Endowments staff re-evaluated the foundation's approach.

"What mattered? How are girls faring? We didn't ask these questions all the time," Petruska says. "We were not in the wrong places. But we couldn't say where we were had moved the needle."

The Endowments' special focus on African American girls in middle school is well-timed, adds Kristy Trautmann, executive director of the FISA Foundation. The 103-year-old organization is dedicated to programming for women and girls in southwestern Pennsylvania and has partnered with the Endowments on some initiatives. Trautmann explains that both foundations are trying to support African American girls during a historic moment in gender awareness.

"We need to be reaching girls earlier," she says. "Something happens developmentally in the tween and teen years, with many of the issues we're most alarmed about starting to emerge in the middle and high school years."

The Rev. Brenda Gregg, director of Project Destiny, explains that her organization focuses on middle school girls to address social and behavioral challenges that have become as serious as those for boys. "With poor academics, domestic violence in dating and other problems, we want to give girls supportive relationships," she says.

The program offers enrichment activities such as dance, art and photography in addition to tutoring and homework support. Project Destiny also partners with the organization Strong Women,

“You can’t be shy when you want a job, you have to speak up.”

VICTORY DAVIS, 12  
SIXTH GRADE  
CURRENT CAREER GOALS:  
DISC JOCKEY AND ARTIST

“I want to help people.”

RYLEE SOCOLOVE, 12  
SEVENTH GRADE  
CURRENT CAREER GOALS:  
GWEN’S GIRLS INTERN, ENGINEER



Strong Girls to provide mentors and with TWogether Pittsburgh to offer a teen-focused curriculum that helps the girls in areas such as self-esteem and career enhancement.

These and other girls initiatives generate long-term benefits to the broader society as well, Trautmann notes. “African American girls are the bellwether of our society,” she says. “And girls are now internationally recognized as a good investment for raising all boats in a community. In that context, the Endowments can really help change the conversation.”

CY&F’s strategy began with developing a fundamental understanding of the hardships facing many black girls. The latest research reveals that expectations, held both by and for African American girls, feature a lower quality of life overall compared to their white peers. Those beliefs can become a self-fulfilling prophecy of poverty, early parenthood, violence and poor health. In turn, these struggles often deplete the mental resources essential for black girls to prevail over difficult circumstances.

To take a closer look at these challenges, the Endowments funded a study, “Gender Norms: A Key to Improving Health and Wellness among Black Women and Girls.” The report was co-written by Scyatta Wallace, CEO of Janisaw Co., which assists organizations in creating leadership development and life-skills programs for girls, and Riki Wilchins, executive director of TrueChild, an organization that provides consulting services to agencies, policymakers and philanthropies on issues related to gender, race and class. Their research focused on three main problem areas: basic health and wellness, reproductive and sexual health, and intimate relationships.

The report, which can be found at [www.heinz.org](http://www.heinz.org), points to particularly destructive realities for black girls. Among them is what “Gender Norms” describes as a “weathering effect,” a physical and mental wearing down of black girls: “[They] have unique race and

gendered experiences of discrimination, which results in multiple stresses that impair their immune system and expose them to higher rates of disease and lower levels of health and well-being.”

Also of concern, according to the report, is the lingering perception that black girls are hypersexual, promiscuous and without control over their lives. That perception drives social hostilities and pressures to conform to stereotypical notions of behavior and appearance. Those ideas often combine dangerously with an expectation that black masculinity is about anger, violence, coercion and control. “Gender Norms” points to evidence that internalizing these beliefs as they are propagated in media and the community is connected to lower self-esteem, sexual risk-taking and the experience of violence among black girls.

Gwen’s Girls is another Pittsburgh agency confronting those challenges with the support of the Endowments. The 12-year-old organization was founded by the late Gwen Elliott the same year she retired as a Pittsburgh Police commander. Young women are placed with the program through social service agencies or law enforcement.

Denise McGill heads the residential program for Gwen’s Girls, which has operated a 15-bed group home for teens since 2006. “We take shelter placements, and we get kids who have been to nearly every other group home in the county,” she says. “Our girls typically come to us due to parent–child conflict, abuse or parental addiction. They often have a history of abuse and neglect; some of them are pregnant, and yet are still going through puberty.”

The girls in the residential program are offered counseling for themselves and their families, assistance with schoolwork, transportation to medical and other appointments, and classes in parenting and job readiness. But even as McGill protects and supports the girls in her care, she believes that prevention is better than intervention. She points out that the choices girls make—and the risks



After being placed in foster care, Angela Campbell, above, arrived at Gwen's Girls in need of help when she was 14. She is now pursuing a master's degree in social work at the University of Pittsburgh.

At Gwen's Girls' Camp Destiny, Jordan Rouse, 12, and Loren Burke, 13, right, spent their summer days in a safe, fun environment and learned to make positive life choices with the help of community role models like artist Anqwenique Wingfield, far right. Wingfield taught the eight-week camp session as an Arts in Action Teaching Artist with MGR Youth Empowerment.

they take—are part of a structure of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that begin long before they are sexually active, under arrest or in foster care.

“We live in a reactive society, where we get to things after they become a problem,” she says. “But we need preventative programs that are realistic to the population we are dealing with.”

Housed in a former school building, Gwen's Girls offers space and materials for study and homework help for girls in its after-school program. Mentors and guest speakers introduce the girls to various career fields and community resources. The girls go on field trips and tours of workplaces and colleges. And community outreach coordinator Crystaline Barger regularly visits local elementary and middle schools, where she leads group discussions and other activities.

“Our life-skills program focuses on self-esteem and healthy relationships,” she says. “We want to help the girls' transition through challenges.”

The Endowments' refocusing of its support for girls' issues comes as its initiatives for black male students from elementary school through college have gained a higher public profile. The foundation's African American Men and Boys Task Force was formed in 2007 in response to sobering socioeconomic statistics about black men in Pittsburgh and community requests to help address the situation. The task force funds programs that emphasize academic and professional achievement, increased economic opportunity, identity and character development, and more well-rounded media depictions of black men and boys. Those more widely known efforts, however, often overshadow the Endowments' work on behalf of girls and young women.

“Our work in the boys' space has received more attention because it had an intentionally public component,” Anderson says. “We are trying to change the negative perception, impressions and images of black boys and men. A public awareness component

within our communications strategy is a significant part of our work in this area.”

To ensure that the Endowments' efforts on behalf of black girls include a broad and culturally relevant context, the CY&F Program enlisted the help of Patricia Cluss, a psychologist and researcher with the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Cluss examined the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs across the country that cover issues such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse and HIV/AIDS.

“I did two things,” she says. “One was a literature search for the kinds of interventions that had been tried, what worked and what didn't. Then I looked at outcomes and how they had been measured.”

For some of the programs she examined, there was not enough evidence of their effectiveness for black girls. “These were programs that had great measures for outcomes,” Cluss explains. “They had determined the effects of programs by using questionnaires to measure things like self-esteem and self-concepts. But they had only been used with a white, middle-class sample.”

Cluss also points out that the programs she studied sometimes did not measure the kinds of development that are most relevant to black girls. “The areas we're interested in are things like empowerment and resilience, and there aren't good studies of programs that have been tested in that way,” she says. “But that's where [Endowments-funded] programs can feel free to innovate.”

Measuring effectiveness rather than relying on anecdotal evidence of success has become a much larger part of programs serving African American girls in the Pittsburgh region. Agencies are using surveys for girls, parents, mentors and teachers that are given before and after the girls' program participation.

Groups also are measuring the girls' progress in their initiatives through comparisons. For example, because the Saturday Academy is part of a larger YWCA initiative for middle school girls, the



organization has a way to learn whether the program is working relative to its other efforts.

“One thing we want to do is follow all our girls and look at their grades, school attendance, pregnancy rates and other things, and compare the Saturday Academy girls to our participants who are not in it,” teen services director Howard says.

Determining the true effectiveness of programs and where changes might be needed helps the Endowments better target its investments in programming for black girls. Individual stories of young women avoiding pitfalls or getting by in spite of them—while inspiring—are no longer enough.

“We’ve always supported programs that help girls avoid behavior that may lead to negative consequences, have healthy birth outcomes if they are pregnant, or increase their parenting skills if they have a child and receive supportive services as needed,” Anderson says. “But it’s important to move beyond that. The question now isn’t just, ‘What does it take to survive?’ We are asking, ‘What does it take for black girls to thrive?’”

Petruska adds that the Endowments staff members also will be looking at the long-term, systemic impact of the different girls initiatives as they consider more than just participation numbers in evaluating results. “We’re hoping to examine issues around professional development, as well as create a new model for establishing future programs.”

But that doesn’t mean that individual successes aren’t celebrated.

“The rewarding moments come when we have kids that call back and thank us, or when you run into a young woman someplace, and she’s doing well,” says McGill of Gwen’s Girls.

On the 22nd floor of the University of Pittsburgh’s Cathedral of Learning, Angela Campbell settles onto a sofa in the graduate student lounge. Her back and shoulders are straight as she leans slightly forward, her large eyes alert, her face eager and curious.

Campbell’s lightly upswept hair gives full display of two ebony crosses hanging from her ears and tapping her shoulders as she turns toward a sunny window overlooking the university campus and the city beyond.

Campbell arrived at Gwen’s Girls when she was 14, after being placed in foster care. “I went into the child welfare system because of truancy and unhealthy, abusive things going on at home,” she says.

She remained with the program for three years. “Vans picked us up to go to Gwen’s Girls after school. We did homework, had counseling, went on field trips and did a lot of other things.”

Campbell eventually became a camp counselor for Gwen’s Girls and improved her grade-point average. She went on to attend Bennett College, a historically black women’s college in North Carolina. There, she worked as a resident assistant in her dorm, served as president of the social work students’ club and volunteered at an orphanage in Costa Rica, among other accomplishments. After graduating from Bennett last year, Campbell is now pursuing a master’s degree in social work at Pitt.

“I want to work with foster youth who are transitioning [to adult life],” she says. “They are very vulnerable, and since I’ve done it myself, I think I can really advocate for them.”

With a focus on her goals, Campbell has little interest in those who expect less of her because she’s a black woman. Talking about it turns her welcoming smile into an impatient grimace.

“You know, I just don’t have time for that,” she says, sighing and rolling her eyes. “If you don’t like me or you want to make assumptions about me, go ahead. That’s your problem. I’ve got better things to do than worry about that.”

Her achievements and her positive attitude are the result of years of support that started early. “The combination of being at Gwen’s Girls and then going to a women’s college really helped me,” she says. “Now, I’m more empathetic, I connect with other black women better, and I’m learning to be comfortable in my own skin.” *h*