

Community & People • Education

Local non-profit celebrates five years of helping girls build confidence, leadership skills

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By [Kristen Miller](#)



Alexandra Young of Plymouth is the founder and executive director of the Center for Girls' Leadership, a non-profit that provides leadership-building opportunities for girls and young women. (Sun Sailor staff photo by Kristen Miller)

One Plymouth woman has used her passion of advocating for women and girls as the foundation to build a non-profit dedicated to “inspiring girls today to lead tomorrow.”

Alexandra Young is the founder and executive director of Center for Girls' Leadership, a volunteer-led organization providing leadership programs and day camps to middle and high school girls in the greater Twin Cities area.

Young, a 2004 Benilde-St.Margaret graduate, credits a good education and the many opportunities she had growing up in helping her decide to go to law school.

“By having that awareness, I was able to hone in on what I wanted to do early on,” she said. “That’s not to say there aren’t bumps in the road and periods of self doubt,” but it gave her the ability to really know herself, Young explained.

She also understands that not all girls are afforded those same opportunities, a realization she came to terms with as a sophomore at the University of South Carolina.

That year, Young was invited to attend an “intensive” four-day leadership retreat.

During one of the activities called “Dream Big,” Young recalls writing in a journal about a dream she had of one day starting a leadership camp back home in Minnesota.

Life went on, and Young found herself deferring law school for a year in order to take a job providing hands-on leadership development to college-age students around 33 different campuses.

“What it did was really open my eyes to all these incredible women we have in college who feel completely incapable of being a leader,” said Young, noting this is something that starts well before college. “Girls are feeling an extraordinary amount of pressure from the media and peer pressure, bullying and things like that,” she said.

During a previous Steps to Success leadership camp devoted to STEM career exploration, girls work in small groups to design a community park. (Submitted photo)

Young referenced a report from the Girl Scout Research Institute stating “Leadership is not a top goal for girls, as only a third (39 percent) say they want to be a leader.”

Furthermore, the report stated “Girls cite social barriers to leadership aspirations, such as not wanting to be laughed at, fear of speaking in front of others, and shyness. Girls are also well aware of gender barriers and stereotypes in the workplace.”

Young wanted an organization that would address the lack of confidence young girls feel and help them realize there are options to lead and serve everywhere, whether it’s in their school, career, home, church or community.

During Young’s third year at St. Thomas School of Law, she took a class on non-profit law and uncovered her “Dream Big” journal outlining her desire to someday organize a leadership camp.

It was in that class that the Center for Girls’ Leadership was organized, officially becoming a tax exempt non-profit.

With a mission to help girls realize they can be leaders in all aspects of their lives, the Center for Girls’ Leadership focused on two main programs of development: Real Girls, Real Leadership; and Steps to Success.

Real Girls, Real Leadership is a day-long leadership camp focusing on four pillars: developing leadership skills, encouraging confidence, defining personal values, and taking action.

Steps to Success is a half-day seminar, offered to middle school and high school girls free of charge, and focuses on a specific industry identified as needing more gender equality.

Past Steps to Success have centered on careers in law, art and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math).

Typically offered twice a year, Steps to Success is a career exploration event which includes a panel discussion composed of women leaders from the community that serve in that particular field, and a hands-on activity.

STEM has been the most popular seminar, Young said, calling the last event that focused on landscape architecture. While some girls were apprehensive at first, they became increasingly interested as they were put in charge of designing their own community park.

“It’s getting them to see everyday things they interact with in a new light,” Young said.

The next event will be Saturday, Feb. 11, and will focus on transportation planning and engineering, as well as internet safety.

“We want to open their eyes to the possibilities that are out there,” Young said, rather than having girls turn away from a career because they think it’s hard or haven’t explored it.

Girls who participated in a past Steps to Success event, pose for a photo showing what the “future of STEM looks like.” (Submitted photo)

The organization also wants to help parents and teachers who are their role models. “We understand we aren’t constant in these girls’ lives, and we really want to help these parents and guardians who are [by giving] them those resources and tools so they can have some of those tougher conversations,” Young said.

This past December, the organization celebrated five years and has since helped roughly 500 young women build confidence and realize their true potential.

“Being able to provide these opportunities for girls in our community, to me, has been a dream come true,” she said.

“To me, we measure our success by – are the girls having fun, are they learning, are they going to be able to take these skills and apply them to their lives?”

“If we can reach just one girl, then we’ve succeeded,” Young said, quoting St. Catherine of Sienna, “If you are what should be, you will light the world on fire.”

“I love that (quote) because that’s what we’re trying to do – spark a girl so she can light the world on fire,” she said.

“We really believe if we can give our time, our talents, and provide these opportunities to girls, that we will inspire them to lead – or at least be prepared to lead, when those opportunities arise – so they don’t second-guess themselves and can go out and really make a difference in their communities,” Young said.

It is for her work in founding and growing the nonprofit that Young was nominated for TeamWomenMN’s 2017 Wavemaker’s award for Community Impact to be presented Thursday, Feb. 9.

This award is given to a company or organization leader “who makes giving back to the community a top priority in ways that benefit the advancement of women, either through their work or through volunteer efforts.”

“I’m so touched,” Young said. “I’ve never been nominated for anything before.”

Young, who is an education coordinator by day for WSB & Associates in Golden Valley, was nominated by Laura Boyd of the consulting firm Leadership Delta. Boyd, who has worked with Young through WSB, is also a member of TeamWomenMN, an organization with a similar mission as Center for Girls’ Leadership, but geared toward professional women.

Her inspiration for nominating Young was two-fold – to bring awareness to the need for developing leadership in girls, and to recognize Young’s vision and efforts in making that happen.

“It’s amazing to me that Alex had the vision and sight to move a girls leadership program forward,” Boyd said, adding that Young essentially used the organization’s four pillars herself in building the Center for Girls’ Leadership.

Upcoming programs

Girls In STEM will take place 9 a.m. to noon Saturday, Feb. 11, at WSB and Associates, 701 Xenia Ave., Minneapolis. Register online at cglmn.org/stem as space is limited.

Girls in Media will be offered this spring, and Girls in Government to be offered this fall. Check the website for details.

“We want any girl – any girl who wants to learn, be inspired,” Young said.

Contact Kristen Miller at Kristen.Miller@ecm-inc.com.

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