

St. Louis Park

MAGAZINE

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The Center for Girls' Leadership develops skills, confidence and empowerment.



Alexandra Young empowers St. Louis Park girls to be movers and shakers via her Center for Girls' Leadership.

Photo by: [Emily J. Davis](#) ^[2]

Benilde-St. Margaret's School alumna Alexandra Young was a college student at the University of South Carolina when her sorority took part in a leadership academy program, and Young was inspired.

"One of the activities was 'Dream Big,' " she recalls. "What do you want your dreams to look like? So I wrote in my journal that I wanted to start a camp just like [the sorority's leadership academy] in Minnesota." After graduation and a stint as a leadership consultant, Young returned to Minnesota to attend law school at the University of St. Thomas.

"About halfway through [my law school program], I realized I didn't want that traditional lawyer route," she says. While cleaning her house one day, she stumbled upon the old journal from college with her note about dreams—and the rest is history. She attended a class on nonprofit law and got her new organization up and running. By the end of her third year at St. Thomas, the Center for Girls' Leadership was born.

The nonprofit designs and runs events to help empower middle and high school girls. Most events are half-day or full-day workshops, held at schools, businesses and churches in the Twin Cities. Attendees meet women leaders from a variety of careers and fields. Young serves as the executive director and oversees a board of volunteers.

"Three years later, we're still going strong," Young says. "And we do a lot here in St. Louis Park because three of our board members live here. Our mission: Inspire young girls today to lead tomorrow."

The center also works with girls on STEM skills (science, technology, engineering and math), Young says. At an event this spring, more than 60 girls learned about the journeys of women in STEM careers. Young says a typical kid's perception like "I don't like math" can quickly turn into, "You're a landscape architect who designs parks for children. That's really cool; I could do that!" The center helps translate school subjects into real-world careers.

This, Young hopes, will get girls thinking about the future—even before they go to college and need to choose a major.

Other programs include Real Girls Real Leadership workshops, often attended by church groups, sports teams or Girl Scout troops. "When you're trying to say, 'I'm a leader,' what does that look like? You have to know yourself," Young says.

Because most of the center's programs are one-day events, Young and her team don't always get to see the effects. But occasionally, the good news circles back. After one workshop, Mary Lenertz, the mother of one of the girls at the event, applied to be on the center's board. "It's really cool to hear from Mary [about] how the program helped her daughter," says Young.

Lenertz's family found the program through a church and school newsletter. Her daughter had been in one school through fifth grade, and had experienced problems with bullying and making friends. For sixth grade, she transferred schools and had a much better experience. The leadership program happened to include many of her former schoolmates, and "it was the first time she was back with some of these girls," Lenertz says. "I just remember thinking,

this is exactly what she needed. It really gave her some of the tools she needed” to communicate confidently.

A few months later, when the center was looking for board members, Lenertz jumped at the chance. “I don’t think that young girls always [hear] that they can be, that they can do, that they are whole beings and equally capable as the young men,” she says. “We don’t need to marginalize ourselves because of society or any other factor.”

For Young, that’s the goal: to know she’s made a difference in a young girl’s view of herself. “To know that our program made that difference, even if it’s just for an hour... to me that’s everything.”

Want to help?

The Center for Girls’ Leadership is always looking for women to serve as mentors and volunteers. [Learn more here](#) ^[3].

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