

# Young Women on the Move

## & JE's JUST GIRL'S GROUP

*We recognize that all girls across the TDSB experience diverse realities. Our core values unite women with the knowledge that we, as educators, must work toward helping them identify and remove the social inequities, which inhibit their success.*

### **-YWM Creed**

This story is about the beginning of that journey at John English.

In early January, I was approached by my school's administration to attend a Girl's Mentorship Conference. It seemed like a perfect fit. As a teacher, middle school girls actively seek me out to tell me their problems and recount their day to day stories. I have never shied away from their friendships but always keep professional distance because I felt that I didn't always have the right training or know-how to counsel the girls and solve their various challenges. However, I quickly discovered that sometimes, they just needed someone to listen.

Attending the YWM January launch was a real eye re-opener. I have always been passionate about the plight and struggles of girls and women. The conference made me realize that in spite of our progress into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on the Girl Frontier, not much has changed from when I was a teen. Today girls face similar struggles, pressures and insecurities; however, they are further exasperated by new technologies such as social networking sites and more aggressive media images. All of a sudden girls are struggling on many fronts. They are exposed and made vulnerable to cyber bullying. The message from the conference was clear. There is a great need for this initiative. We need to empower our girls, boost their self-esteem and break the cycle of social inequities. The vehicle to this change would be to provide our girls with strong, confident, caring mentors that live and breathe these ideals and exemplify them in their everyday.

Upon my return to school I started to really contemplate the idea of a girl's group. What would it look like? How would it be run? Who would take part? And most importantly how would I get started? Luckily help was on the way. In March, I was invited to a Professional Development opportunity run by the organisers of YWM. This PD helped me answer these questions and teach me strategies on dealing with 'girl stress'. That day, many helpful work-shops were offered to teachers. The two that peaked my interest were: *How to Develop and Sustain a Girls' Club* and *Emotional Stress Management*. Through these work-shops I gained much needed guidance on establishing and running a girl's group. As well, I acquired confidence in dealing with

the girls. Essentially, I learned that I was not supposed to solve their problems, but with the right tools I could encourage and empower them to solve their own problems. I left that day excited, with new-found confidence and with many great hand-outs, ideas and resources, ready to start our journey.

The first thing was to gain the support and enlist the help of the staff at my school. I prepared a short power-point presentation, which I presented at a staff meeting. Luckily a few teachers were willing and excited to help. We also enlisted the help of the community Health Nurse as well as a community member who runs an established mentorship program; *"Aspirations"* at our school. My power-point was also designed to generate a list of girls who would eventually be involved in our group. However, I remained puzzled about the best way to deliver our message to the girls and more importantly how many girls would take part. Which program would we use? How many girls could we effectively handle to make a difference? I remember the organisers saying "start off small", but in the end my group included 15 grade 6s. I gathered my lists of recommended books and began my "JUST GIRL'S GROUP programming.

The April YWM conference *"Living your dream"* gave me the perfect kick-off to our Grade 6's "JUST GIRL'S GROUP". That day was a great point of interest and fun for the girls. They came back to school with many great stories and an enthusiastic message for the rest of the girls. For myself, I acquired more helpful resources to sustain our girls in this journey and since I knew that June was just around the corner, that day I decided that the best program should be a simple one. One which tackles the issue of self-esteem. The Dove Program seemed like the best fit. It is comprehensive, accessible and free. It will provide us all with a wonderful initiation into "JE's JUST GIRL'S GROUP"

Our mission is to encourage caring, courageous, confident young leaders who will in turn live their lives and exemplify the YWM mottos and creed, sharing their own experiences with their peers, eventually spearheading their own girl's groups.

Our journey has just begun; the next two months will be very exciting and hopefully fruitful. Stay tuned.