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The Girls Are Alright: With Colbians leading the way, girl-empowering Hardy Girls Healthy Women sparks a national movement

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THE GIRLS
With Colbians leading the way, girl-empowering Hardy Girls Healthy Women sparks a national movement

On the corner of 68th and Lexington in New York City, a young woman hops onto a wall near the entrance to Hunter College. A light sweater covers her ruffled top, and she reads from a piece of bright pink paper.

“I want you to know that I am taking back ownership of my body,” she shouts, her voice rising above the city din. “I refuse to let the media affect my body image or self esteem.” A few people stop to listen, bundled against the autumn wind, and one woman smiles as Tasha De Sherbinin ’11 continues. “I’m taking sexy back and I want everybody to know it. It’s important that women everywhere know they are in control of their sexuality.”

De Sherbinin was protesting on the street corner as a participant in the SPARK Summit, Oct. 22 at Hunter College. SPARK stands for Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge, and 300 women and girls were trying to ignite a movement against the oversexualization of girls in the media.

But in New York City, street theater is common. How can one young woman get the people within earshot to really hear her message? How can the women and girls at SPARK change the culture of today’s media? How does one even begin?

By enlisting the help of girls, that’s how.
De Sherbinin, a women’s, gender, and sexuality studies (WGSS) major from Manchester, Mass., was one of five Colby students at SPARK representing not only Colby but also Hardy Girls Healthy Women, a Waterville-based nonprofit organization that has become a national player in programs and research that empower girls.

Hardy Girls Healthy Women (commonly called Hardy Girls) celebrated its 10-year anniversary in 2010 and that same year received the Maine Governor’s Award for Nonprofit Excellence in the small organization division. Hardy Girls shows women, girls, and their communities the power of working together to create change, whether it’s implementing sexual harassment policies in their school or challenging products or ads from a large corporation.

Colby is one of the keys to Hardy Girls’ success. From cofounders Karen Heck ’74 and Professor of Education Lyn Mikel Brown to staff members Megan Williams ’04, Jackie Dupont ’04, and Allison Cole ’07 to faculty, staff, and students who have served on the board, Hardy Girls is rife with Colbians. More than 100 Colby students volunteer each year while others engage as interns.

Hardy Girls and Colby partner in civic engagement projects as well. Brown offers a practicum through the Education Program that requires students to work with girls. The Colby Volunteer Center, an arm of the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement, has adopted Hardy Girls as one of its ongoing programs. And in both September and January, incoming first-year students volunteer at Hardy Girls as part of the C2IT (Colby Community Involvement Trips) portion of student orientation.

“Colby’s had a huge impact in our ability to build our capacity as an organization,” said Williams, Hardy Girls’ executive director. In turn Hardy Girls offers Colby students the opportunity to engage with a successful organization to gain real-life experience. With Colby’s support, Hardy Girls has developed and refined programs that are affecting lives across the country and around the world.

The SPARK Summit leadership team included people from six organizations that hailed from Washington, D.C., Oakland, California, New York City, Boston—and Waterville. Hardy Girls was one of two original sources of the idea to bring together researchers, educators, and program directors who are alarmed at the detrimental effects that sexualized media have on girls’ development. Brown and her research colleagues around the country, some of whom sit on Hardy Girls’ national board, knew that to gain momentum, affect policy, or get money for research, they needed to band together.

Hardy Girls also knew that SPARK needed girls as part of the equation. “If Hardy Girls was not an active partner in SPARK,” said Williams, “we would not have girls in full partnership with adults working against this issue.”

Hardy Girls offers strength-based programs and opportunities for both girls and adults that promote hardiness, “a health psychology notion around resilience,” explained Brown. Hardy Girls’ premise is that it is our culture, not the girls in it, that needs fixing. “What makes us unique is we go in and we work with communities and with the adults,” said Brown, “but with girls front and center.”

Training adults and communities to create “hardiness zones” specific to the individual community gives girls a safe place in which to grow, be creative, and ask questions about their world. By learning skills such as media literacy and critical thinking, communities and girls can decipher and challenge the culture surrounding them while developing an appetite for social change.

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Professor Lyn Mikel Brown (education), Hardy Girls cofounder
and on Facebook, Gruver said she admires Hardy Girls’ ability to put theory into practice.

Since 2008, 1,500 adults around the country have participated in a Hardy Girls training or workshop that introduced the theories and practices shown effective in creating hardiness zones for girls. Hardy Girls now offers training online through webinars.

Project Girl, an arts-based program in Madison, Wis., relied heavily on Hardy Girls philosophy and on Brown’s research to get its organization up and running. Brown collaborated with cofounder Jane Bartell on the Project Girl curriculum and has supported the group during its eight-year existence. “She’s been absolutely key in everything we’ve done,” Bartell said of Brown. “She’s my mentor.”

In central Maine, Hardy Girls makes a real difference for local girls, participants and evaluations confirm. In 2009-10 alone, Hardy Girls reached 240 local middle and elementary students through its Adventure Girls program and Girls Coalition Groups. Colby students facilitate 17 weekly Girls Coalition Groups in schools using Hardy Girls’ curriculum to lead discussions and activities.

Berol Dewdney ’13, a WGSS major from Chester, Vt., who facilitates a group in China (Maine) Middle School, studies feminist theory and social change in her Colby classes. As a facilitator, she puts theory into action. “Not just thinking and writing about it—but thinking, writing, and doing,” she said.

Colby students have been doing a lot for Hardy Girls over the years. Hardy Girls’ curriculum, an 80-page guide, grew out of activities designed in 2003 by students in Brown’s practicum class who developed workshops for junior high girls in Winslow and Waterville. The girls loved the workshops and asked for more, Brown said.

The next school year Brown worked with six Colby students,
including Williams and Dupont, in an independent study to explore the possibility of running weekly sessions. In conjunction with Mary Madden, a professor at the University of Maine, the students developed more activities and discussions related to issues that girls said were important to them. After another year of running groups, the organization produced *From Adversaries to Allies: A Curriculum for Change*.

Hardy Girls has sold 1,200 copies of the curriculum, now in its third edition, to users in 38 states. One current student facilitator is using the curriculum while studying in Senegal; former facilitators take it with them after graduating and use it around the country and in far-flung places including Sudan, Nicaragua, and Mozambique.

Most student volunteers leave Waterville after graduation, but some have stayed, notably three of five current Hardy Girls staff: Director of Programs Jackie Dupont ’04, Director of Development Allison Cole ’07, and Executive Director Williams, whose leadership has been recognized twice in the last two years. In 2009 Williams was named a “Nexter,” an emerging leader, by *Mainebiz* magazine, and in 2010 Williams won the first Open Door Award, for women under 30 who demonstrate exceptional leadership, from the Frances Perkins Center, a research facility honoring Perkins, the first woman to serve in a presidential cabinet.

“I have had the opportunity through Hardy Girls to develop my own hardiness, to develop my own sense of self, my own leadership, my own activism, my own voice,” said Williams.

Waterville native Kerrilee Knights is one of the many young women to benefit from Hardy Girls. First introduced to Hardy Girls at 12, Knights, who said her home life “got a little crazy,” participated in programs, volunteered, and joined the board at 16. She learned new definitions of success from the positive role models she met, and in 2010 Knights, 24, earned a degree from Green Mountain College in Vermont. “Hardy Girls was always there as a positive source in my life,” she said.

**The Research**

Hardy Girls’ programming and resources are fueled by current research in girls’ development and education, particularly that of cofounder Lyn Mikel Brown, Colby professor of education. Brown has authored or coauthored four books including *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls* (New York University Press, 2003) and *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers’ Schemes*, (St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

The American Psychology Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls recently found “evidence of negative consequences for girls when they are sexualized or exposed to sexualized images.” Today’s youth spend nearly eight hours a day engaged with some sort of media, according to Brown, and children and teens are bombarded with sexualized images and products. Movies and videos portray young women—and even young girls—in compromising or provocative roles. Advertisements use scantily clad models to sell everything from jeans to soft drinks to cars. Marketers promote such products as padded bras for toddlers and a pole-dancing Barbie.

These products and images narrowly define who girls should be, emphasizing looks, clothing—and attractiveness to boys, critics say. This exposure to “sensationalized media and narrow gender roles,” according to Brown and Hardy Girls executive Director Megan Williams ’04, “contributes to three of young women’s most common mental health complaints: depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders.”
research—and what the trio calls “the conversation on Karen’s deck”—Hardy Girls Healthy Women officially began.

For five years the cofounders volunteered and built the organization from the ground up. From their office across from Waterville City Hall they created a resource center, established a board of directors, developed programs and trainings, raised money, and refined curricula. In 2005 the cofounders hired Williams as Hardy Girls’ first executive director.

One of Williams’s biggest achievements was establishing the Girls Advisory Board (GAB), a group of ninth- to 12th-graders that advises the executive board on issues important to girls their age. The GAB helps the board keep the program fresh and relevant.

The advisory board played an important role in Hardy Girls’ newest venture, Powered By Girl, intended to create an online space for real girls. Then-seniors Beth Ponsot ’10 and Sarajane Blair ’10 brought vision and technical savvy to the concept while GAB members offered ideas for content and interactivity. A year later PoweredByGirl.com was launched as a teen girl-driven social media site.

Last fall PoweredByGirl.com was populated with material generated by five Colby students engaged in an independent study project with Brown. They took turns blogging, posting images or videos, and training advisory board members and other high schoolers on how to write and post material. Now anyone who joins can post material, including sexualized ads that can be re-captioned or “graffitied.” PBG offers an alternative to negative social media while educating teenagers about the impact of media in their lives. A year later PoweredByGirl.com was launched as a teen girl-driven social media site.

Mackenzie Riley, a Waterville High School senior and president of the Girls Advisory Board, was thrilled to meet other young activists. “In our little GAB we get really excited about topics about feminism and sexualization—but [SPARK] is more than 100 girls. It’s so exciting,” Riley said in New York.

Riley and the other attendees were equally charged up by the national figures who spoke at the summit. MTV’s “sexpert” Amber Madison emceed SPARK’s opening session, which included a talk by Jean Kilbourne, documentary filmmaker, author, and advertising expert. The keynote was delivered by actress and activist Geena Davis, founder of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (www.seejane.org), which strives to “improve gender portrayals in children’s media.”

“We judge our value in society by seeing ourselves reflected in the culture. If you see yourself, then you feel important,” Davis told the rapt audience. “So what message are we sending little girls—and boys—about girls if the female characters are one-dimensional, sidelined, hyper-sexualized, or simply not there at all?” she asked.

“We have an opportunity to be agents of change,” Davis said. “Because it’s by changing the cultural message that women and girls are less important that we will be able to empower women to reach their full potential.”

For Hardy Girls, SPARK strengthened partnerships around the country that will expose Hardy Girls to issues facing a broader population of girls than the primarily white, lower-middle-income girls they serve in central Maine. The summit also built momentum and established connections between high schoolers, Gen-Xers, and baby boomers in an intergenerational give and take that will amplify girls’ voices through shared ideas and activities.

“Movements have to be things that aren’t just inclusive of independent activities to move an issue forward,” Williams said. “In its very nature it has to be a lot of different players who are doing their own thing and sharing those things amongst each other.”

When Gloria Steinem joined a post-SPARK reception on East 65th Street (at President Franklin Roosevelt’s former home), women young and old eagerly awaited their turn to speak with the feminist icon. Steinem listened intently to each person and later, addressing the group, said, “This feels like the beginning of a movement.”

For longtime activists like Steinem, Heck, and Brown, involving young girls in the fight is crucial to future success.

“We need everybody on board. We don’t need girls just being able to look pretty, we need their brains,” said Heck. “That’s where I center my hope.”

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Geena Davis, actress and activist

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