

She Inspires Girls To Be Better Than They Think

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Sejal Hathi, 17
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When speaking to Sejal Hathi, it's hard to remember that she's 17. While she looks her age, her voice and word choices are of someone 10 years older.

So it's disarming and refreshing at the same time to hear this high school senior talk about college choices. It does beg the question of how many classmates know her organization, Girls Helping Girls, has inspired 5,000 girls in only two years to act on various worldwide issues.

"It's just grown exponentially," Hathi said. "We don't know how many girls have been impacted. We're in a little under 20 countries."

The Girls Helping Girls name is somewhat self-explanatory, with two main programs under its wing. The first is Empower-A-Girl, which pairs teams of girls across the U.S. with girls in developing countries. From there, the teams work to jointly find problems in their respective communities, and come up with solutions to fix them.

Empower-A-Girl aims to get girls working toward and accomplishing at least one of four goals: eliminating poverty, opening access to education, improving health and promoting peace. If these sound familiar, they are modeled after the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Hathi offered up two Empower-A-Girl examples. In Nigeria, "our sister-team is raising funds to build a community center," Hathi said. They have partnered with the Wiseup Foundation, a like-minded non-governmental organization based in Nigeria's capital, Lagos.

In Bangalore, India, work is underway to start a nonprofit to "develop a more sustainable foundation" for the area, Hathi said. Particularly of interest is education for local farmers.

The second program is Sisters 4 Peace, a social activism network intended to motivate and recruit girls to start their own projects or join one in progress.

"I think everyone is a born changemaker," Hathi said. "For girls especially, sometimes they think [activism] is not their place. Whenever girls get involved, they feel empowered first. We teach by identifying your own strengths and then to mobilize your team."

It wasn't too long ago when Hathi, then 15 years old, was working on a benefit event with San Jose, USA-based Girls for a Change. The event was to raise awareness of the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, Sudan. With several Sudanese people in attendance, it was then that her eyes were opened to the countless number of issues facing girls across the globe.

"The one fundamental, underlying issue was ignorance," Hathi said. When it came to girls, "this ignorance was principally cultural and institutional."

To get started, Hathi applied for a Youth Venture grant from Ashoka, a philanthropic organization. "Just filling out the application, reaching out to possible mentors, through that process I was able to solidify several contacts," she said.

There are numerous ways to measure a program's success, but Hathi echoes a voice of hope when describing one Nigerian girl, who went from apprehensive to ambitious while with Girls Helping Girls.

"She entered the program not having a sense of self. This girl wasn't willing to talk about herself," Hathi said.

Hathi recently got a letter from the girl, who wrote: "I want to grow up to be the director of a major computer company."

If 5,000 girls is higher than expectations for some, try 10,000. That's how many Hathi and Girls Helping Girls wants to mobilize by the end of 2009. And now that she's about to enter college, Hathi wants to create a Girls Helping Girls network for her soon-to-be academic age group.

"I want to see Girls Helping Girls sustain itself for 5 to 10 years and hopefully forever," she said.

