

Morning Sentinel

May 16, 2004

Central Maine Newspapers

It's all about girls, bonding for strength and boldness

Thalia Matthews, 14, an eighth grader at Winslow Junior High School, could barely restrain her enthusiasm.

"It's really, really good!" she said, after bursting into a small room located next to the office of guidance counselor Penny Linn. "They help us out when we are having an argument with a friend. And, they always know what to say," she said.

Matthews was bubbling over with praise for a weekly support group called the Girls' Coalition. As other coalition members trooped into the room for one of their last meetings of the school year, the air was charged with youthful energy.

"You can get feelings out that normally you can't do during school, where you don't have a confidential setting," said Keisha Baldwin, 13.

"It's a fun place," Kristina Hamilton, 14, said. "We learn about harassment — physical and verbal harassment from girls and guys. We talk about media images."

"Stereotypes," said Devyn Averill, 14.

Another girl, however, pointed to confidentiality breaches. "People tell. There is still more telling," she said.

Devyn emphasized trust and group support. "I love it. I feel comfortable, and what I say stays with the group," she said.

"Girls need spaces for a coalition and an opportunity for bonding, a place to do important stuff, to talk about ways to support each other and to be creative and bold in the world," said coalition organizer Colby professor Lyn Mikel Brown.

With support from counselor Linn and school principal Hugh Riordan, Brown launched the coalition with Colby student assistants, Laura Barrow of Chicago, Megan Williams of Falmouth and Karima Ummah of Litchfield.

A hot topic that afternoon was the box-office hit, "Mean Girls," a film about female bullying. To Brown, the movie portrays girls as nasty, catty and dumb and is the antithesis of the positive self-image she hopes to foster in girls. Nonetheless, the film impressed some coalition

members.

"I thought it was awesome," said Alyssa, launching into an explanation of the comedy's plot that centered on "The Plastics," the aggressive, A-list girl clique. "The message was: 'Don't try to be somebody you are not,'" she said.

Brown countered: "Don't you think, that even though the film had a good message, that what it does is show the worst in girls? I'm concerned how the media gives the message of what girls are all about. I know from what you are, that you're not like that."

Alyssa and the group reflected on the film's blonde stereotypes. "That's not how people are in junior high," she said.

"It's making us look bad," Devyn said.

Brown, who lives in Waterville, is associate professor of education and women's gender and sexuality studies. She is also the cocreator of Hardy Girls Healthy Women, a nonprofit organization based in a downtown Waterville. Hardy Girls aims "to provide healthy opportunities for control, commitment and challenge in girls' lives," she said.

Her third and recent book, "Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls", is a study of interpersonal conflicts affecting young women.

Yearlong discussions and creativity fostered among coalition members have blossomed into a smart, eight-page, illustrated magazine, "It's A Girls' World."

Its full-color pages display the girls' original works — essays about friendship, trust and relationships, poetry, illustrations, a poignant story about a death of a relative, a thought-provoking advice column, "Ask Mallory," and an interview with Sarah Standiford of the Maine Women's Lobby, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to increase opportunities and leadership skills for women and girls.

"It's a real magazine. The whole point is to showcase the best of these girls, to show that they are girls of substance," Brown said, as the

girls eagerly read over proof copies.

“Doing it together was the goal,” said Barrow. To defray printing costs, she drummed up a total of \$1,000 from a Maine Humanities Council grant and a donation from the Colby Student Research Fund.

One-hundred color copies have been printed; less costly, black-and-white versions also will be made. A group goal is to send the magazine to other women’s organizations and continue the

funding process, Brown said. The magazine is posted on the Hardy Girls Web site:

www.hardygirlshealthywomen.org

Judging from members’ enthusiasm, the Girls’ Coalition is providing at least one haven from the painful and often lonely throes of adolescence.

“You learn that it’s not always you who have problems. Other people have problems too,” said Lauren Roderigue, 13.