

# New Moon

The Magazine for Girls and Their Dreams

www.newmoon.org

November/December 2004

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## The Coalition vs. Mean Girls

Imagine this scene: You've tripped on the bleachers leaving a school assembly; you lurch forward, desperately looking for something to grab on to, and your armload of books flies in all directions. You land in an ungraceful heap in front of a group of popular girls. If you've been watching movies like *Mean Girls*, reading the latest Seventeen magazine, or filling out one of the many "mean girl" surveys on the web, you know what to expect: a burst of laughter, whispers, eye-rolling, some well placed taunts designed to remind you that you've just secured your place at the bottom of the school's social ladder.

But what if, instead, you hear murmurs of concern: You look up. "Are you okay?" one of the girls asks. You nod warily. "I did the same thing last week," says another, as she and her friends help you up, pick up your books, dust you off. You feel a wave of relief as they save their eye-rolling for the kids who laughed at you. "Let's go." "Forget about them," they say, and you walk out of the gym together. You go your way. They go theirs.

Wouldn't happen, you say? Think again. In the midst of all the hype about mean girls—and it's been a major media blitz for about two years now—I started a girls' coalition group. It wasn't that I didn't think girls couldn't be mean. Of course they could. It's just that I know from years of research with girls that they are so much more than the sum of these petty stories and images. Mean girls: the new stereotype. It's such a trap. Speaking up and saying what you want can get you labeled mean, so you better spend all your time trying to be supernice, even if you don't feel like it. This doesn't sound good to me. I know girls are smart and I suspected they could appreciate this no win situation. So the group was born.

We met in small-town Winslow, Maine's junior high school. Fourteen 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls from different school cliques joined three college students and me. We met

once a week to talk about things that really mattered to us: how and why girls fight, what divided us and got the way of working together, sexual harassment, unfairness, popularity, friendship, family life, and stress. We talked about things that made us anxious and things that brought us peace.

It was exhausting, exhilarating, scary, and fun all at once. But it was far from perfect. We had some tense moments and we often failed to be our best. Yet it *was* life changing for all of us. Thalia learned "that we should feel okay in our skin." Tabitha learned "that it doesn't matter what others think." Meryl came to "have more of an open mind"; Sarah gained "more respect" for others. Krissy no longer "makes fun of people." But it was the *group* more than these *personal* changes that were most powerful. These very different girls became a force to contend with in their school. Many told stories about defending kids that were teased. A sense of loyalty overcame a fear of betrayal as they learned to "stick up for people having a hard time" and as they discovered that "you can go to [girls in the group] and they'll be there and listen." The whole group had their back and as a result they were stronger and braver than they would have been on their own.

A coalition is a group of people that shares a value system and a purpose. You don't have to be friends with the girls you are in coalition with; you just have to respect them and work toward the same goal. Some of the girls did make new friends in the group, but most left each week to return to their different cliques. Yet when they saw a coalition member, they greeted her. They shared a bond, a sisterhood. They weren't all nice girls; they weren't all mean girls. They were just real girls who knew that if they tripped on the bleachers, they could count on their sisters to pick them up.

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