

CHANGING THE WORLD ONE GIRL AT A TIME

BY NICOLE WESTMORELAND

TWELVE TEENAGERS FROM SAN JOSE CAME TOGETHER NEARLY TWO YEARS AGO AS SHY, QUIET GIRLS WITH BIG IDEAS. THEY WANTED TO PERSUADE MORE YOUNG PEOPLE TO PAY ATTENTION TO PROBLEMS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES AND STEP UP TO HELP SOLVE THEM. THE TEENS DECIDED TO PRODUCE A VIDEO FOR THEIR PEERS ABOUT CREATING SOCIAL CHANGE. WITH SOME SUPPORT AND COACHING FROM THEIR MENTORS, THE GIRLS LOBBIED AREA TELEVISION STATIONS TO AIR THE VIDEO, AN EFFORT THAT LANDED THEM ON A LOCAL TALK SHOW AND A SEGMENT ON THE NBC AFFILIATE'S EVENING NEWS. THEIR NEXT GOAL? TO TAKE THEIR VIDEO AND CAMPAIGN TO THE OPRAH WINFREY SHOW.

WHAT THESE GROUP OF GIRLS HAVE ACCOMPLISHED IS EXACTLY THE OUTCOME THE FOUNDERS OF GIRLS FOR A CHANGE (GFC) HAD IN MIND WHEN THEY STARTED THE ORGANIZATION: MIDDLE- AND HIGH-SCHOOL AGED GIRLS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS LEADING SOCIAL CHANGE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES WITH THE AID OF MENTORSHIP FROM PROFESSIONAL WOMEN. THOUSANDS OF GIRLS FROM SILICON VALLEY AND THE BAY AREA HAVE PARTICIPATED SO FAR IN DYNAMIC

PROJECTS OF THEIR OWN DESIGN, AFTER MEETING THROUGH GFC.

"DON'T SOLVE IT FOR US"

THE SEED OF GFC WAS A STUDY THAT FOUNDERS NIKO CLIFFORD AND WHITNEY SMITH CONDUCTED ON BEHALF OF SILICON VALLEY'S OFFICE OF WOMEN'S ADVOCACY IN 2000. THE TWO, WHO HAD WORKED TOGETHER AT GIRLS SCOUTS OF AMERICA (SANTA CLARA COUNTY) AS WELL AS AND THE SILICON VALLEY GIRLS COALITION (SVGC), SURVEYED 4,000 GIRLS FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS IN SILICON VALLEY TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES THOSE GIRLS FACED. THE GIRLS SURVEYED SAID THEY BELIEVED THAT THEY HAD ACCESS TO A BRIGHT FUTURE, BUT DIDN'T HAVE THE RESOURCES OR SUPPORT TO MOVE FORWARD. ADDITIONALLY, THE GIRLS MENTIONED ONE COMMON REQUEST: DON'T FIX THINGS FOR US. LET US IDENTIFY A PROBLEM AND COME UP WITH SOLUTIONS ON OUR OWN. THAT REQUEST BECAME THE DRIVING IDEA BEHIND GIRLS FOR A CHANGE. AFTER SECURING A GRANT FROM THE JOINT POWERS AUTHORITY OF THE CITY OF SAN JOSE AND THE COUNTY OF SANTA CLARA, SMITH AND CLIFFORD LAUNCHED GFC IN 2001 WITH THE MISSION TO SERVE GIRLS IN A UNIQUE AND INTERACTIVE WAY.

THE MODEL THEY DEVELOPED LOOKS LIKE THIS: GFC PROVIDES MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS WITH THE RESOURCES AND SUPPORT TO WORK IN TEAMS WITHIN THEIR OWN COMMUNITY. THE GIRLS COME TOGETHER IN TEAMS TO DEFINE THE PROBLEM, CREATE A STRATEGY, AND EXECUTE THE PLAN FOR HELPING THEIR COMMUNITIES. THEY ARE ASSIGNED TWO WOMEN COACHES WHO HELP FACILITATE BUILDING THE PLAN, AS WELL AS EXECUTING IT.

"WE PROVIDE SUPPORT AND RESOURCES, FROM SOUP TO NUTS, ON HOW TO BE A LEADER WHO CAN EFFECT SOCIAL CHANGE," CLIFFORD SAYS. "GIRLS CARE DEEPLY ABOUT THEIR COMMUNITIES AND SEE THE LITTLE PROBLEMS THAT ADULTS OFTEN MISS. THEY WANT TO BE ABLE TO WALK SAFELY FROM HOME OR TO HAVE A CLEAN NEIGHBORHOOD. THESE ARE THE PROBLEMS THEY WANT TO FIX."

THE GIRLS ARE RECRUITED THROUGH OUTREACH PROGRAMS AT LOCAL SCHOOLS, GROUP HOMES, AND EMERGENCY HOUSING. GFC HOLDS WORKSHOPS TO ATTRACT YOUNG GIRLS TO THE PROGRAM BY OFFERING THEM A CHANCE TO LEARN FROM MENTORS, BUILD LEADERSHIP SKILLS, AND TO EFFECTIVELY

CARRY OUT A PLAN FROM START TO FINISH. LAST YEAR, GFC HAD 30 SOCIAL ACTION TEAMS AND HAS 40 TEAMS WORKING TOGETHER IN 2004. GFC SERVICES ABOUT 1,000 GIRLS PER YEAR IN SILICON VALLEY AND ANOTHER 200 GIRLS FROM OTHER PARTS OF THE BAY AREA, SUCH AS OAKLAND AND EAST PALO ALTO.

"WOMEN ARE NOT GENERALLY GOOD PHILANTHROPISTS," SAYS CLIFFORD. "WE HAVE A BIGGER FEAR IN GIVING AWAY OUR MONEY COMPARED TO MEN. THIS PROGRAM TEACHES YOUNG GIRLS TO GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITY SO THAT WHEN THEY BECOME WOMEN, THEY CAN GIVE BOTH TIME AND MONEY."

BENEFITS FOR WOMEN BUSINESS LEADERS, TOO

GFC ALSO RECRUITS PROFESSIONAL WOMEN TO ACT AS COACHES IN HELPING THE TEAMS EXECUTE THEIR PLANS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE. MOST OF THESE WOMEN COME FROM LOCAL CORPORATIONS, POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS, OR NON-PROFITS. BEING A PART OF GFC PROVIDES THE WOMEN WITH 40 HOURS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING IN AREAS SUCH AS PROJECT MANAGEMENT, PUBLIC SPEAKING, FUNDRAISING, AND FACILITATION. IN ADDITION, THEY GET ACCESS

TO A NETWORK OF OTHER HIGHLY ENGAGED PROFESSIONAL WOMEN.

"THESE WOMEN NEED TO BE SURE OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR OWN ABILITIES BEFORE THEY CAN HELP THE GIRLS ACHIEVE THEIR PROJECT GOALS," SAYS CLIFFORD. THE ETHNIC MAKEUP OF THE TEAMS IS 93% NON-WHITE, WHICH IS ALSO REFLECTED IN THE MAKEUP OF THE WOMEN WHO COACH THEM (58% NON-WHITE).

MANY OF THE COMPANIES AND ASSOCIATIONS INVOLVED WITH GFC ALLOW THEIR EMPLOYEES TO TRAIN OR WORK WITH THE GIRLS DURING OFFICE HOURS. ORGANIZATIONS THAT WORK WITH GIRLS FOR A CHANGE INCLUDE NATIONAL SEMICONDUCTOR, MICROSOFT AND CITIBANK.

RESULTS FOR GIRLS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES
IN ADDITION TO HELPING THEIR COMMUNITIES, THE GIRLS INVOLVED WITH GFC GET A CHANCE TO LEARN ABOUT THE TRIAD OF AMERICAN COMMERCE TODAY: NON-PROFITS, CORPORATIONS AND THE POLITICAL ARENA. THE GIRLS LEARN HOW TO FUNDRAISE, WRITE GRANTS, ENCOURAGE POLITICAL SUPPORT OR GET CITY OR COUNTY APPROVAL.

"THE GIRLS WALK AWAY WITH A BELIEF IN THEIR OWN ACCOMPLISHMENTS," CLIFFORD ADDS.

THEY THINK, 'I MADE THIS HAPPEN. WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?' THEY SEE FIRSTHAND THE CHANGES THEY'VE MADE, NO MATTER HOW SMALL."

THE 7TH THROUGH 12TH GRADERS STAY ON TEAMS FOR 2 YEARS AND CAN THEN TRAIN TO BECOME A COACH AND POSSIBLY ON THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS FOR GFC. THE BOARD WILL OPEN UP SEATS TO AS MANY GIRLS INTERESTED IN THIS RESPONSIBILITY. IN FACT, THERE IS A CO-PRESIDENCY OF THE BOARD: ONE ADULT AND ONE GIRL.

GFC IS ALSO ENCOURAGING LOCAL COMMISSIONS, COMPANIES AND NON-PROFITS TO OPEN JUNIOR BOARD SEATS TO THESE PROACTIVE GIRLS. CLIFFORD HOPES THIS WILL GIVE THE GIRLS A VIEW OF AT THE BEHIND-THE-SCENES DECISION-MAKING AT THE BAY AREA'S MOST PROMINENT BUSINESSES AND GOVERNMENTS.

FROM KITCHEN TABLE TO FELLOWSHIP RANKS
SHORTLY AFTER THE INCEPTION OF GFC, CLIFFORD WAS ABLE TO MOVE OFF OF HER KITCHEN TABLE AND INTO THE START UP NETWORK OF SOCIAL FUSION AND THE WOMEN'S TECHNOLOGY CLUSTER (WTC).

"SOCIAL FUSION AND WTC IS LIKE A FAMILY," SAYS CLIFFORD. "FOR AN ORGANIZATION TRYING TO GET OFF THE GROUND, IT IS AN AMAZING RESOURCE. THERE IS ALWAYS SOMEONE THERE TO GIVE ADVICE AND SUPPORT WHEN YOU NEED IT MOST."

IN THE SUMMER OF 2003, CLIFFORD WAS AWARDED A PRESTIGIOUS FELLOWSHIP WITH THE DRAPER RICHARDS FOUNDATION FOR HER VISION AND WORK WITH GFC. WITH THIS FELLOWSHIP, GFC WAS GRANTED \$300,000 TO SUPPORT CURRENT SUSTAINABILITY AND NATIONAL EXPANSION.

GFC'S GRAND VISION IS TO HAVE 10 SITES ACROSS THE COUNTRY. THE NEAR-TERM GOAL IS TO ADD A SECOND SITE BY 2005 WITH THE PROGRAM LAUNCHED IN 2006. CITIES BEING CONSIDERED ARE AUSTIN, TEXAS, BOSTON, MASS., AND SACRAMENTO, CALIF., AMONG OTHERS. IN FACT, SMITH HAS RECENTLY BEEN HIRED ON AS A CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WITH CLIFFORD TO SET THE NEXT PHASE OF GFC IN MOTION.

THIS EXPANSION IS DEARLY NEEDED, ACCORDING TO CLIFFORD. SHE CITES DIRE STATISTICS ABOUT WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LEADERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES: WOMEN MAKE UP JUST 13% OF THE TWO HOUSES OF

CONGRESS. WOMEN ONLY MAKE \$.76 ON THE DOLLAR. IN 10 YEARS, THAT HAS INCREASED BY JUST 1 CENT. LOCALLY, LESS THAN 1 IN 10 DECISION MAKERS AT SILICON VALLEY COMPANIES ARE WOMEN. WHILE WOMEN HAVE DONE MUCH TO ADVANCE THEIR POSITION IN THE LAST 50 YEARS, THERE IS MORE THAT CAN BE DONE. CLIFFORD HOPES THAT GFC'S WORK WILL ADVANCE WOMEN'S ISSUES BY STARTING WITH YOUNG GIRLS.

"IF WE WERE TO REACH OUR GOAL OF HELPING 10,000 GIRLS PER YEAR, WE COULD ACTUALLY CHANGE WHO IS SITTING AT THE DECISION-MAKING TABLES IN CORPORATIONS, NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS, AND POLITICAL PARTIES," SAYS CLIFFORD. "NOW, THAT WOULD BE AN AMAZING CHANGE INDEED."