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Teen develops program to empower adolescent girls

By Traci Newell



What began as a middle-school student's interest in fashion and community service has resulted in an innovative approach to helping teenage girls who struggle with self-image.

Los Altos resident Molly Dellheim, a senior at Woodside Priory School, merged her diverse interests in community service and fashion into a program to share her own discovery of the dos and don'ts of fashion for each body type.

"I felt the pressure to look like everyone else when I was in sixth grade," Dellheim said. "Then I started to realize that I didn't need to. I didn't want to wear those clothes – they weren't flattering on me."

Molly's mother, Nan, encouraged her and helped her to develop a curriculum for middle-school girls to aid them in appreciating their beauty, power and potential.

"I realized that we could make something for girls so they could see that they didn't have to be cookie cutters – they could dress to flatter their own bodies," Dellheim said. "They didn't have to change their bodies – they could just change their clothes and have individual styles."

With eating disorders becoming a national epidemic and adolescent depression linked to lack of self-esteem on the rise, efforts to improve girls' body images are increasing. After consulting with experts in the fields of education, counseling, nutrition, yoga, posture, fashion and eating-disorder prevention, Molly and Nan translated the information into an innovative body-image and self-esteem program for middle-school girls that was piloted at Woodside Priory three years ago.

Classes included stress management techniques, growth and development concepts, media awareness, examples of positive role models and other topics known to help improve self-esteem. The Dellheims soon realized that few schools could provide such a comprehensive program.

“The How I Look Journal,” co-authored and self-published by Molly and Nan, resulted from their desire to reach out to more girls. The self-image journal is a tool to help young girls discover their own beauty and possibilities.

“I think it’s really helpful for young girls to realize that they’re not alone in these feelings, but that each girl is really special,” Molly said. “Changing perceptions is really a lifelong exercise, and girls need to be learning how to do that at an early age.”

Molly communicates personally with the readers through short journal entries written on blue clouds spread throughout the pages of the journal. Each cloud contains insights based on personal experiences.

“The journal entries are really a chance for me to speak to the girls because I think that is what is special about this,” Molly said. “It is not a teacher telling someone how to think, the advice is coming from a girl who went through similar emotions.”

The sixth- and seventh-grade classes at Woodside Priory and the Girls’ Middle School in Mountain View are familiar with the journal. The Cadet Girl Scout troop is designing a badge around journal concepts.

Molly is conducting her first research, using her statistics class, on the effectiveness of the journal in improving girls’ knowledge and self-esteem. She leads a group of older mentors who interact with the girls going through the program and she plans to continue her research in the future as she enters college next year.

“The reality is that middle school is really, really difficult for a lot of girls, and sometimes painful, and it doesn’t need to be – that is what I am trying to do with this,” Molly said.

She doesn’t expect her suggestions to solve all the problems of self-confidence issues with adolescent girls, but she said she hopes they will help.

“I’m not expecting to dissolve all feelings of self-consciousness and self-doubt and bad body image. But for girls who go through this, they can recognize that they aren’t feeling good about themselves and figure out why and how to handle the emotions,” Molly said.

For more information or to purchase “The How I Look Journal,” visit www.HowILookJournal.com.

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