

Patricia Wachtel, president and CEO of Girls Inc.

Q&A

How would you rate the self-esteem of young girls today, and what do you think are the greatest influences?

Our culture is confusing for young girls, at best. At worst, it is disgusting. There are music, videos and movies that give messages that are unhealthy for young women, particularly when it comes to body image.

What specifically does Girls Inc. do to address self-esteem among young women?

We've refined ourselves from after-care and snacks to intentional quality programming that is research-based and outcome-driven. It's themed around words like "strong," "smart" and "bold." We talk about subjects like financial literacy and finding the courage to say "no" to the things that will get in the way of reaching goals. When we start these programs at the age of 6, over time it builds a more positive girl with healthy self-esteem.

Families today often have one absent parent. What needs to be done in our community to help children who face multiple challenges?

The answer is what we're doing. We're collaborating with lots of other partners. We've picked 12 neighborhoods in Marion County we call "hubs." Each has three partners, such as schools, libraries and Scout troops. The purpose is to get all these programs within walking distance of the girls. Our programs are fun and interactive, and help the girls explore their own talents.

How does Girls Inc. reach out across socioeconomic levels?

Our history has been to work in low-income neighborhoods. We offer scholarships to summer camps, because we don't want to turn any girl away. Our partnership models are based on a standard sliding scale, so at a school that has 50 percent or more on free and reduced lunch, our programs are offered for free. As we move out of center city, we charge a modest fee per girl, but a lot of township schools provide funding through their foundations.

What are three of the hottest programs for Girls Inc.?

The bullying and aggression programs are widespread in the schools. The pregnancy-prevention program is another popular one. Media literacy that addresses how we view body image and how magazine models are portrayed is the third.

It's estimated that nearly 60 percent of the U.S. work force is made up of women, and many are mothers. How has Girls Inc. changed to accommodate working women who also want to volunteer?

We try to craft our volunteer opportunities the way people live their lives today. Our model encourages women to take a long lunch hour to present a Girls Inc. program in a school once a week for about four weeks. That way, they are still able to get home to their families at night. This model also works for retirees and stay-at-home moms. We don't ask volunteers to commit to an extended period or multiple years, just give a little of their time.

Patricia Wachtel, 54, became president and CEO of Girls Inc., a nonprofit organization, in January 2007 after years of working in the corporate world.

Now Wachtel, who is celebrating the organization's 40th anniversary, is part of an evolution. What started as two small clubs has grown into a community partnership with more than 50 organizations and 150 volunteers serving nearly 2,000 young women. Plans are already in place

INTERVIEW BY T.J. BANES
PHOTO BY CHARLIE NYE,
THE STAR

to serve 100,000 school-age girls in four counties — Boone, Hamilton, Hendricks and Marion — by 2012.

Girls Inc. provides school-based and camp programs for girls ages 6-14 that focus on healthy relationships, college and career planning, and emotional strength.

"The reason I'm successful today is because I had two loving parents who taught me the value of an education," said Wachtel, who grew up in Hammond. "I was the rich kid, because I had loving parents who used to sing to me when we went on family camping trips every summer. Not every child has that, so my goal is to give that girl the tools to help herself."

Patricia Wachtel

AGE: 54.

EDUCATION: Graduate of Ball State University with a degree in business administration. She received her master's degree from Indiana University.

HOMETOWN: A native of Hammond, Wachtel lives in Pike Township.

FAMILY: Her husband, David, is a sales consultant.

Girls Inc.

WHERE: 3959 N. Central Ave.

INFO: www.girlsincindy.org.

Patricia Wachtel sits on the peace wall made by girls in Girls Inc., which is celebrating its 40th anniversary.

