

**A Women's Fund Conversation:  
Opportunities to Support the Education of Girls and Women in the SouthCoast  
June 9, 2009  
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Opportunities for Girls:

I was an "LBJ baby" who benefited from the anti-poverty programs established in the late sixties-early seventies. I can remember buses coming into the project to take us out of the city to see other people and places. I have come to believe that I, along with most of my friends from the projects, have fared well as professionals because of the barrage of opportunity and exposure brought about by these programs. While formalized mentoring is getting a lot of attention for supporting youth, I benefited greatly from women who just cared about me as an individual and gave me genuine support and guidance. I think of the support I received from the women at the YWCA as being the most instrumental in my development. One such woman was Grace Young, who mentored me from childhood into my 20's. She took the time to provide transportation, teach concrete skills (this is how you write a letter, "do the ask", send a thank you card, answer the phone, function in an office and run a program) and placed me in leadership roles (e.g. Youngest MLK Committee Chair). I believe that mentoring goes beyond an hour each week. The benefits for me came from women who showed a consistent and genuine interest in my growth over time. Given these experiences I would suggest the following:

1. Provide girls with the opportunity to explore people, places and things. Only through constant exposure to challenging opportunities can you begin to desire more for yourself. This can also spark curiosity and fuel the imagination. I know schools offer field trips and local organizations arrange outings, but what about consistent, meaningful experiences in the community and beyond?
2. At a recent meeting on global poverty, it was stated that you could close the achievement gap for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds by giving them significant summer experiences. Provide scholarships for girls to attend meaningful summer camps/programs or support existing programs that offer such experiences for girls.
3. Transportation is usually a huge barrier for many organizations and this may be an area where donors could provide assistance.

4. Think creatively about outreach beyond the well-crafted flyer: Good old-fashioned door-knocking in the projects and poor neighborhoods goes a long way.

My daughter was told in an interview that she was a bit timid. Upon hearing this, I immediately thought about how society socializes girls to be good and well behaved. I thought...I know the importance of having a voice, so how did I fall into this trap with my own daughter? I think of Alice Walker and her essays about women and silence. Is silence strategic or a weakness? Do we do enough to talking with girls about having a voice, and about all of the fears and benefits that are associated with speaking up and speaking out? Given this experience I would suggest the following:

1. Provide girls with concrete strategies and opportunities to find and use their voices. Laurie-Robertson Lorant has worked with young people on public speaking through the Frederic Douglass Read-A-Thon. Recently, I asked a young girl from New Bedford, who had been a reader, to speak at the State House in Boston about what Douglass means to her. I can't tell you how proud I was to see her self-confidence shine. This again is a direct result of the consistent, genuine support I mentioned earlier.
2. ArtWorks! has a storytelling series. Is there a way to tap this network of professionals to work with girls on storytelling and have a night of "Girls Speak"?
3. There have been many references in meetings about the need for students to learn about the city through oral history. Is there a way for girls to practice using their voice through oral traditions?

### Opportunities for Women:

While at a seminar at Radcliffe, I was horrified to hear the very cruel, candid and sad experiences of accomplished women at Harvard. At that same time, I was in the middle of conducting research about New Bedford for my fellowship at Harvard when I discovered that many women had similar stories to share about access and opportunity (references to "The Old Boys Network", not being brought to the table, and competitive individualism). All of this interferes with coalition building and getting work done in the community. I'm constantly fielding calls from women in the workplace who experience competition or thwarted attempts at development. I found that I have learned best by candor from professional women, and men who were willing to listen and provide guidance. That said, there needs to be a safe environment to allow these discussions and development to occur:

1. Train managers on how to create this safety in the workplace for women. It has to start somewhere, and you hope it has a ripple effect into the community. Develop a pact in your office where you agree to abolish demeaning behavior.
2. Train managers on talent identification and management. Look at skill sets rather than degrees or experience. Develop women in the workplace to take on more senior level roles and ask yourself why you don't do this. A leader is someone who creates other leaders. We need to support autonomy and creativity. How do we provide opportunities for women to reach stretch goals and engage in self-reflection?
3. What about a woman's spiritual growth? Do we provide a space where authority can't intervene when a spirit empowers a woman to action? There are many ways in which a woman can be called to action. Oftentimes we overlook a woman's spiritual and religious growth. I have met women in human resources at Harvard who look at church organizing and volunteering as an essential skill set as opposed to degrees. How do you work with the interfaith community on broadening leadership-training opportunities for women?
4. Finally, how do you create a space where women can trust each other, be candid, and assist others with their development? In the end, it is really about having the maturity and confidence to be comfortable enough to open doors for women without it being internalized as a threat to self.