Alumnae Can Help Wisconsin’s Girls Thrive

As an Alverno alum, you may wonder how you can make a difference in the lives of the girls and women who will follow in your footsteps. One answer may be simpler than you think: Be a role model.

According to the most recent “State of Girls in Wisconsin” report, released by Alverno’s Research Center for Women and Girls (RCWG), there is improvement for girls in some areas, but persistent, troubling patterns in others, such as depression and body image. Showing girls what it is to be a strong woman could go a long way toward improving the climate for girls.

“When you look at these issues, it sometimes seems insurmountable … but then there’s the power of one,” said Rhonda M. Ware, executive director of the RCWG, during a live, on-campus taping of 4th Street Forum, a program on Milwaukee Public Television. “There’s the big space and the everyday space.”

The power of one comes down to how each woman talks about herself and serves as an example for the girls in her own life. This is where all women—Alverno alumnae included—can make a difference.

Ware mentioned the power of one as it relates to the report’s findings during the forum taping. She was joined by fellow panelists Denisha Tate, chief strategic officer for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee, and Christine Lidbury, the executive director of Wisconsin Women’s Council Madison.

First conducted in 2007, the “Status of Girls in Wisconsin” report provides extensive data on girls ages 10 to 19 in areas such as education; physical, mental and sexual health; substance abuse; violence and abuse; crime; and media engagement and social activities. These data are then used by organizations that serve girls to develop the solutions, programming and resources needed to address issues. The 2014 report was released in partnership with Girl Scouts of Wisconsin Southeast and other sponsors.

Promising trends for Wisconsin girls included decreases in tobacco use, teen births and juvenile crime. In addition, Wisconsin high school girls have enrolled in more Advanced Placement courses than boys and more of them are likely to graduate from high school and attend college.

The downside, however, is that girls have lower rates of passing Advanced Placement exams. In particular, girls continue to lag behind boys in the areas of science, technology and math. The disparity between girls and boys achieving advanced levels appears to widen with age. For example, in fourth grade about 50 percent of girls are proficient or advanced in math, but that number drops to about 44 percent by tenth grade.

“There’s a big fallout in middle school of girls who decide they can’t do math anymore,” Lidbury said during the taping. “It’s not that they can’t do it. It’s that they decide they can’t do it.”

Rhonda M. Ware, executive director of the RCWG, talks about the power of one and serving as an example for young girls.
This gap is particularly pronounced when it comes to minority girls. Alverno has been actively addressing this issue through its Girls’ Advanced Academy of Science and Mathematics. The program, which is funded through a College Ready grant from Great Lakes Higher Education Guaranty Corporation, is designed to improve STEM performance and college enrollment among low-income, minority high school girls who come from families where neither parent has a college degree.

Girls come to Alverno’s campus on Friday evenings to participate in hands-on, project-based learning that incorporates chemistry, biology and mathematics. The program’s theme—the Science of Beauty—naturally draws the attention of teen girls. In the first project, students studied the chemical properties of beauty products and how they interact with the skin. They then formulated, created, tested and analyzed their very own skin lotion, and then presented their research to family, friends and teachers. The girls build self-confidence and interest in STEM as they gain familiarity and a sense of belonging in a college environment.

This is exactly the kind of role modeling that Tate mentioned during the 4th Street Forum taping when she offered the example of a girl who excels in chemistry or biology. Teaching may be seen as the only career path, but if this girl met someone who was a biochemist, she would realize there are further opportunities.

“We need to allow women who are in these fields to go before girls,” Tate said. “If I don’t see it, I don’t dream it. My paradigm needs to shift to know that this is possible for me.”

This year, 71 percent of incoming Alverno students are first-generation college students. These students are paving the way to a better life for their families. By serving as role models, Alverno alumnae help change the paradigm and show them what is possible.

~ Heidi Jeter

The program is working. It has grown nearly 40 percent since it was piloted in 2011–12, and 100 percent of the first-year participants enrolled in college.

Alverno’s Girls’ Academy exemplifies how good data can be used to make improvements. It also shows the importance of mentorship. First-generation math and science majors at Alverno serve as program assistants, working directly with the high school girls and providing role models of success.

Watch part 1 of 4th Street Forum’s series “Wisconsin’s Girls: How Well Are They Doing?” on their website. Part 2 will air Friday, March 20, at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, March 22, at 10 a.m. Dive deeper into the “State of Girls in Wisconsin” report on the RCWG’s website.