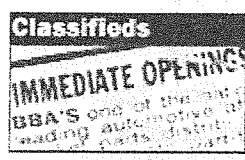


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TAKING GIRL TALK TO A DEEPER LEVEL MAINE GATHERING LETS YOUTH SHARE, COMMISERATE

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CAMDEN, Maine - Tucked between the mountains and the harbor, more than an hour from any major mall, this coastal Maine community seems like an ideal place to raise children. Unlike more rural areas of the state, opportunities abound, whether it's hiking, studying art, or working in a town where everybody knows your name.

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But girls who live in this well-heeled, well-scrubbed community are finding that the relative safety of its streets harbors menaces as crippling as in any city. Heavy sexual expectations from boyfriends coupled with behavior expectations from everyone from the corner grocer to your best friend feed a churning rumor mill. When things get out of hand, increasingly girls are finding themselves looking for control in the one place they can get it: starving their bodies into a form of submission.

"It doesn't seem like anything when you're in it," said Christine DeMichele, a 16-year-old junior at the Camden-Rockport High School, who was sporting a yellow chrysanthemum in her dark hair. "But if you step out of it for a moment and take a look back, you can't believe what you're dealing with."

Camden is not alone. Throughout Maine, girls are saying that tensions of adolescence are compounded by small-town talk. But for the last seven years, girls in Maine's mid-coast region have been able to spend at least one day openly contemplating their lives at the annual Mainely Girls conference.

This year's gathering in March featured films and videos of issues important to teenagers. They were followed by discussions. Added to the mix were workshops on using cameras, a play about eating disorders, and

an installation by artist Amy Wilton about issues affecting women. As part of this apartment-sized art piece, called "A Woman's Place," with laughter and trepidation, the visitors entered by walking a path of bathroom scales, each scale displaying a different reading.

For girls who are beginning to confront adolescence, use of uninitialized value at /data/commerce/bg_archives/newarch.cgi line 725. Use of uninitialized value at /data/commerce/bg_archives/newarch.cgi line 725. No recipient! Just knowing that others face similar issues is sometimes a revelation. At the start of the day, Annie Malone, a 14-year-old freshman from Camden, spoke about how a previous conference had impressed upon her that girls in Russia, Egypt, and China were facing similar issues of depression and confusion. "Living in a small town," she said, "you feel like you're the only one in the world - but you're not."

It was, said founder Mary Orear, basic depression that launched Mainely Girls. Orear, who remains the program's director, had been an English teacher. "I was teaching middle and high school English and I started noticing that these sparkling girls I'd taught in seventh and eighth grade were now in high school, and they seemed distressed, depressed," said Orear. "I noticed a sense of hopelessness. This was not a happy situation. So I got people together to begin talking, reading, listening, to see what concerns the teens had that were not being addressed."

She launched Mainely Girls with the hope of directly reaching the troubled girls she was seeing. The organization advocates for girls in the state, offering leadership training to area girls while also examining such issues as abuses of girls in the state's juvenile detention program. Said Orear, "I see Mainely Girls as helping to educate girls and adults in what issues are." But, the heart of the program is the annual conference that brings together girls from diverse towns for the day.

As a spring wind blew icy air off the ocean, a girl described how her first boyfriend, at age 15, came to her after two months to say that unless she had relations with him, they would have to break up. In his crowd, two months was the going time limit. Two years later, and still visibly distressed by the experience, this high school senior recalled, "It was really hard, it took a lot of time to get over, but I feel so much better now that I did. I'm so glad I stuck to my guns."

If she hadn't, in a small town like Camden, she might have been branded for life. Said Elizabeth Bradeen, a 17-year-old senior, "You don't have any room to move around, to make mistakes to try to figure out who you want to be, no room to be borderline, or to try to lead double lives. There are not too many homosexuals in our school because they're afraid to come out. Everyone knows who you're dating, who you're sleeping with, all the faux pas you've ever committed."

Orear agreed. "I talked to a group of girls one time and I asked them:

'What happens to an eighth-grade girl who decides she wants to experiment around, and then later decides that's not what she wants? Will she be able to get back with her former group?' The answer was no."

And so, girls take their pain out on themselves, punishing their bodies. While watching Cathy Plourde's one-woman play about eating disorders, "The Thin Line," another Camden student found tears streaming down her face. Afterward, Heather Brown, told the group, "I have a friend with an eating disorder. She still keeps her clothes from when she was really sick. She wants to get back to that weight."

A senior spoke of her bout with bulimia. "I wish someone had said at the time, 'I don't care how you look, I just think you're a wonderful person.' "

But would she have heard? Said Brown, a 16-year-old sophomore from Camden, "I let the person know that if she ever needed me, I was there, I told her over and over again I loved her. But she pushed me so far out of her life - everything you say gets twisted."

By the end of the day, girls were saying that being a teenager means learning to accept the consequences of their varied actions, struggling to fit in - and yet still being who they are. Brown, who hopes eventually to be a counselor, said that in the process of figuring out who you are, it becomes difficult to know whom to trust. "You and your friends can joke and fool around, but you trust your guidance counselor," she said. "Your guidance counselor becomes your best friend."

That morning, she added, she took a risk just by getting dressed, donning a black T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Bad to the Bone."

"I was wondering if I'd get away with wearing it. I did," she said, a triumphant gleam in her eye. In a small town, it is hard for teenagers to be true to themselves but also fit in. But, said Brown, "It's a lot easier to be myself than to try to fool myself."

For most girls, such issues are just bumps on the way to adulthood, but not for all. Orear recalls running into a girl a while after an earlier Mainely Girls conference. Said Orear, "This girl told me, 'That conference saved my life.'" Orear said. " 'I hope you understand what I'm saying,' the girl continued. 'I had a severe eating disorder and I didn't know what to do about it. I listened to the speaker that day. It literally saved my life.' "

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