

Grrrl Talk

by Janice Turner

Cet article rapporte les activités innovatrices d'un groupe d'étudiantes d'une école secondaire qui se rencontrent régulièrement pour partager des ex-



Gail Geltner, "Diana," 1985.

périences qui touchent les femmes et la condition féminine.

Most students have already spilled out on to the sidewalk as afternoon fades into night. But at least one classroom, Woburn Collegiate Institute's Room 132, is filling up.

More than two dozen students—all of them female—have come together for their regular Thursday meeting of the Grrrls' Coalition.

On today's agenda? Sexism in advertising.

Former members and first-year university students Jaclyn Law and Hannah Sung, both 19, have returned to share some of their course material. They've brought along a slew of magazine ads, which they use to expose offensive stereotyping—women as subservient, dominated, and unequal.

As the guest speakers get under way, the coalition's co-ordinators distribute pieces of a birthday cake they've brought in for English teacher

Karen Grimshaw, the group's staff sponsor.

"It's pink 'cause it's girls," says co-ordinator Penelope Jackson, with just a hint of sarcasm.

The comment draws laughter. This is one place the girls feel they can celebrate their gender and speak their minds.

"We're not humourless, men-hating dykes," insists Penelope, 16, at meeting's end. "I come because even though I consider myself enlightened, the more I know the more I can reach out to others."

Guys are invited to attend occasionally, but mostly this is time and space for girls to do their own thing.

"In a lot of classrooms boys can be really, really hurtful and really dismissive of what we have to say," Penelope says. "Here, we have a lot of freedom."

Gender bias in education, homophobia, date rape, AIDS, racism, breast cancer, abortion, women in the workplace—nothing is considered out of bounds.

Several girls choose to introduce themselves as feminists.

"But you don't have to be a feminist to come here, although I don't think it's a bad word," Penelope notes.

The girls sit in a circle, some behind desks, others on desks. They zoom in on the magazine ads, cheering the few girl-positive ones—portraying strong confident women doing things rather than simply posing—and panning the rest.

There are ads for athletic shoes, skin creams, liquor (most of the magazines are American publications), and hair products. The women appear almost universally weak and submissive.

"They're selling the female just as much as they're selling the product," Hannah says, encouraging the girls to look at ads with a critical eye.

The group leaders note that in one ad the woman is childishly balancing a cotton ball on her nose like a trained seal; in another, a United States brand of cigarettes is described as "a woman thing"; in yet another the presenters suggest that the "no means no" anti-date rape slogan is being ridiculed.

The material may be controversial, yet the meeting's atmosphere is hugely relaxed. Radical, high-strung, hysterical these girls are not. They take their turns speaking. Conversation flows freely.

Asha Tomlinson injects that she finds it "disgusting" that demeaning advertising is so widespread. "The fact that these ads are there show that people like the stuff," she says. "Sex sells. Advertisers know that women's bodies sell."

"I think sex is sacred," says Kate McGee, 17, the group's other co-ordinator, "but I can't get offended (by sex in ads) as long as it's tasteful. After all, advertising is corrupt."

The Grrrls' Coalition was launched in the 1993–1994 school year by a handful of senior students. Initially, reaction was cool. Many girls were unsure; many guys felt threatened, while others seemed positively jealous.

Now the coalition is a fact of life, even if not everyone—not all girls or guys—can relate to its objectives: to provide a forum to discuss women's rights, women's health, and women's history in a non-judgmental environment and to offer support and encouragement to other Woburn students.

The group has a policy of posting minutes of its meetings for other students and staff to read and to allay any fears that there's a lot of male bashing going on. Periodically, guest speakers are invited to bring their expertise.

Once this day's discussion around advertising is over, one coalition regular announces she'll be conducting a

survey of about 200 students on the topic of dieting. She asks for input on the list of proposed questions.

Two other regulars report that they've been successful in getting a local coffee shop employee to stop harassing young female patrons.

"The guy was brushing by you, making sexual gestures, and being very vulgar," says one girl. "We wrote a letter to the manager and it's stopped."

"It makes me so mad when people say we don't need feminism any more!" fumes Penelope.

Another girl talks about an abusive relationship she was in. The case went to court and her ex-boyfriend pleaded guilty. Going public paid off, she says. "Don't be intimidated."

The hour-and-a-half meeting is winding down. Kate stays behind after almost everyone leaves to stress how comfortable she feels being an openly pro-life member of the coalition. To be able to speak out and be accepted as a feminist "was a landmark for me."

"I see a lot of low self-esteem," she

says. "Girls need a place where they can support and educate each other."

"The classroom can be a really hostile place," she adds. "Boys dominate the classroom still. I know a lot of girls who are afraid of looking like a stupid girl. Girls communicate on a different level than boys. Here we can get right down to issues."

In future, Kate wants to find out about volunteer opportunities for coalition members at women's shelters and other organizations. It's important, she says, for girls to get experience and have goals and aspirations.

Staff sponsor Grimshaw has been with the group since the outset. She has no doubt that a girls' coalition is as necessary now as it was then. "Girls still need a place to talk" in a non-competitive environment.

Over the years, the group's regulars have grown more diverse, which makes for livelier discussions, says Grimshaw, a "longtime feminist."

"It's really gratifying to see the girls becoming more aware of things. They're great kids to be with and it's really nice to have contact with them

outside the (traditional) classroom."

Grimshaw is unfazed by any suggestion that the group may alienate boys. "Any time there's any group that's female-centred, there's going to be flak and this doesn't just apply to schools."

The most significant concerns of adolescent girls include self-image, sexuality, relationships, and personal safety. And questions relating to those issues, Grimshaw insists, are too important to be left unanswered.

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Janice Turner is a staff reporter at The Toronto Star.

JOANNA M. WESTON

Grandfathers

One died before I was born
but this one
passed on a mystery:
he is, we believe, locked
in a large, brown trunk
in the attic.
He didn't like
carrots or parsnips
and voted consistently
red. And, for reasons
unknown to his wife,
he labelled his socks
with paint.
He scorned mild pornography,
preferring
it blatant and raw.
He died in a hoax
played by my sister,
something to do
with a child's revenge,
she said.

Joanna M. Weston has been published in several anthologies and magazines, including Chiron Review, Dandelion, Writer's Own Magazine, Green's Magazine, and Tidepool. Her most recent chapbook is All Seasons (1996).

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