

# Milwaukee Journal Sentinel article – July 26, 2009

## PEARLS offers safe circle where girls can share concerns

By FELICIA THOMAS-LYNN

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Shakia Rayford (left), a student from the Milwaukee High School of the Arts who started in the PEARLS for Teens Girls program as a seventh-grader and now works as a student facilitator, is thrilled that her older sister, Latiera, 17, is interviewing as a facilitator.

### PEARLS for Teen Girls

- **Mission:** Committed to being the community's signature program for maximizing girls' self-development.
- **Address:** 2100 N. Palmer St., Milwaukee, WI 53212
- **Phone:** (414) 265-7555

Jack Orton

It started out simple.

A single strand of pearls passed from one girl, seated in a circle, to the next.

"Whoever had the pair of pearls sat and talked about the important parts of her life," said Colleen Fitzgerald, recalling the early days of a middle school empowerment program that ultimately would transform the lives of hundreds of girls.

The school offered a secure place where girls could gather and discuss real, everyday issues in a trusting environment where they felt emotionally safe.

"That was huge," said Fitzgerald, then a volunteer at Jackie Robinson Middle School who met each Tuesday after school with a small group of girls at probably one of the most vulnerable stages in their lives.

"A lot of girls at this age lose connection with their own self-efficacy," she said. "Instead of cultivating their own sense of confidence, they turn to their peers. The opinion of their friends becomes very important."

Fast-forward 15 years and the program, now PEARLS for Teen Girls, serves at-risk middle and high school students in 20 locations, including other Milwaukee public schools, and has branched out to charter schools and other community-based organizations.

The organization's name is an acronym for Personal responsibility, Empathy, Awareness, Respect, Leadership and Support.

## Positive message

"We are reaching these girls at the core of who they are," said Danae D. Davis, the organization's executive director.

The program has grown from being a single volunteer effort into a full-fledged nonprofit organization that is viewed as a community model for building teen leaders.

"Many of these girls do not have positive relationships with other girls. Many have horrible things going on in their lives. Many of them have experienced violence and seen violence," Davis said. "We are giving girls a safe space to identity their hopes and dreams and pursue them."

Through the program, participants gain knowledge in five key areas: loving themselves, offering helping hands in the community, building healthy relationships with others, believing the sky is the limit, and striving to achieve.

"When I first started with PEARLS, I didn't want to be a part of it," said Shakia Rayford, a sophomore at Milwaukee High School of the Arts. "My attitude was kind of messed up. I would get into arguments and fights.

"They taught me if I want to be successful in life, I have to get along with others," said Rayford, who serves as a facilitator with the program. "I now have a different outlook."

The program also takes participants on college tours, and this year PEARLS has created a component that matches junior and senior participants with coaches that guide them along the path toward college.

## Haven't had role models

"For many of them, they are the first (in their families) to go to college. They don't have role models," said Yolanda Thomas, who leads the college mentorship program.

"We want to make sure they have applied to college, have their financial aid information filled out and meet all of the deadlines," Thomas said. "We want them to be successful."

## Alumni event Sunday

The organization will hold its first alumni celebration Sunday for all former members at 4 p.m. at Carver Park, 911 W. Brown St.

Tawanna Jackson, a program graduate who is now a junior at Mount Mary College majoring in business administration, said she wouldn't miss the event. She said the organization was there for her at a crucial time in her life.

"My mom died when I was 16," Jackson said. "They were extremely supportive. They helped me to become a strong, positive woman."

*Faces of Hope focuses on Milwaukee-area people who need a hand and the organizations that are helping them. If you have story ideas, e-mail Felicia Thomas-Lynn at [fthomas-lynn@journalsentinel.com](mailto:fthomas-lynn@journalsentinel.com) or call (414) 224-2073.*