



Photo by Adam Goings

Life coach takes on ‘drama of girl world’

BY HEATHER GRAY
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For Michelle Kelley, helping girls find their voice isn't a job, it's a calling.

According to Kelley, that calling – and her passion to see young women successfully navigate the relationships in their lives – led her to open Girls Stand Strong in downtown Warrenton last month.

"I just had a very strong feeling that this was the right time," said Kelley. "I felt so compelled and passionate to help these girls that I knew it was work I had to do."

Through Girls Stand Strong, Kelley offers classes for pre-teen and teenage girls, where she teaches them emotional and social skills designed to help them navigate "the drama of girl world" while discovering who they are.

In her more than 20 years of counseling work with children, adults and families, Kelley has always felt a connection with women and girls and a desire to help them be more confident.

As a single mother with two girls of her own, she knows first-hand the struggles facing the gender and the encouragement needed to propel girls in a positive direction.

"Our society focuses on academics and shooting girls forward, and we've succeeded because girls now outnumber boys in areas like college enrollment," she said. "So we're soaring, except in the area of emotions and social [skills]."

Kelley, who previously worked with the Fauquier Counseling Center, said her niche simply "became apparent after a while."

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Peggy Doyle
Fauquier Counseling Center

"I do this work because of who I am and my own history," she said, characterizing her childhood years as shy and introverted.

But according to Kelley, that girl "doesn't exist anymore."

"Now, I'm very assertive and outspoken and confident," she said. "But it was a process, and I didn't have anyone teaching me; I just had to figure it out on my own."

Rather than as a counselor, Kelley now styles herself as a life coach for girls, a distinction she believes dispels some of the stigma attached to therapy.

COACH

From Page A1

"I realized that I was going to have to go to the girls and find them in order to get this information to them," said Kelley, who began holding classes last August.

Since opening Girls Stand Strong in January, Kelley has been "blown away" by the community's positive and interested response and hopes to grow the number of classes she teaches from once a month to once a week.

Kelley feels the critical age to reach girls is before and during middle school, while they're still open to suggestions and not as "set in their ways" as high school girls.

In each of her classes, which are offered in several age groups, Kelley talks about relationships and choices.

"I talk about choices with all the age groups, but choices as it relates to dating with high school girls, and choices when it comes to friendship and drama with middle school girls. With the younger ones, it's more about friendship and how to choose good friends," Kelley said.

Many times, women and girls believe they must wait to be chosen as a friend, but Kelley encourages girls to choose with whom they are friends and even with whom they are not.

"We're not flowers in a field," she said. "We can be proactive."

Kelley keeps her classes informal and casual to promote a comfortable atmosphere, generally limiting participation to 12 girls.

Local high school student Julia Hale, 17, said attending one of Kelley's classes gave her confidence and helped her face problems head on.

"All the things she talks about are things that people my age and older than me [struggle with]," said Hale, referencing relationships, online drama, and peer pressure. "It takes over our lives and we don't really know how to be strong and independent, but Michelle is helping us do that."

In her capacity as a life coach, Kelley believes she can "have parents' backs" and provide complimentary guidance and encouragement to that girls receive at home.

"I'm trying to support parents," she said. "I can be so much more relaxed [with the girls] and give them advice that their parents want to give them, but sometimes [the stresses of] living get in the way."

Those in the counseling and guidance community are quick to voice their support of Kelley's endeavor.

"We see an awful lot of young people who are just making poor decisions...and we want to teach these girls to stand up for themselves and

feel good about themselves,” said Peggy Doyle, a clinical nurse specialist in psychiatric nursing who worked with Kelley at the Fauquier Counseling Center.

“I don’t know of anyone else doing what she’s doing...and I think she’s really going to do an important service for this community.”

Julie Kirk, a Fauquier High School guidance counselor, would love to see Kelley invited to do classes in the schools.

“The more kids can be exposed to learning how to deal with those issues the better,” Kirk said.

Indirectly, Kelley believes her work will reach beyond the female population.

“How many middle and high school guys do you think are going to come to a healthy relationships class?” she said. “It’s not going to happen...but in working with the girls and helping them to change, I’m indirectly affecting guys.”

For more information on Girls Stand Strong, visit Kelley’s website at www.girls-standstrong.com.

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