2015 Project of the Year: SEEDS' GURLS Corps!

GURLS Corps!
(Girls United in Resilience, Leadership and Service)
SEEDS

Submitted by Hannah Traverse on Fri, 12/12/2014

SEEDS, host to a Youth Conservation Corps based in Traverse City, Michigan, has for several seasons partnered with Child and Family Services of Northwestern Michigan (CFS) — a 76-year-old organization that provides foster care, adoption services, counseling and advocacy programs to over 3,000 people annually. Coinciding with the 2014 season, the Biederman Foundation — a local family-support organization, stepped in to support the expansion of this partnership. At the time, seven of CFS's eleven teens aging out of foster care were young women. Five of these young women formed GURLS Corps!; an all-girl program SEEDS created to offer job training, mentoring and education to young women who are aging out of the foster care system, struggling to complete high school, and who may have additional risk factors that could hinder a successful transition into adulthood.

Teens aging out of foster care face a variety of challenges as they learn how to support themselves and live independently. Approximately one in four will be incarcerated within the first two years after they leave the system and more than 20 percent will become homeless at some point after age 18. Additionally, only about 58 percent have a high school diploma by the age of 19, compared to 87 percent of non-foster youth.

Young women exiting the foster care system arguably have it the hardest, as teenage girls are twice as likely as teen boys to develop adolescent depression and are much more likely to experience self-image issues.

GURLS Corps! – which stands for Girls United in Resilience, Leadership and Service – recruits young women from Elements; a CFS program that teaches independent living skills (like healthy eating, and driver’s ed) to foster youth ages 14 – 21. SEEDS has hosted all-girl crews in the past, but traditionally only 10 – 15 percent of their Corpsmembers are young women. However, having a girls-only program was important in order to address sensitive issues the young women face and avoid the sometimes complicated social pressures of a co-ed crew. As a result of more actively recruiting women, SEEDS increased their female enrollment to 41 percent.