



## **No Lights. No Camera. Plenty of Action!**

“Improving the Lives of Young People” is the Goal of the Theater Action Project

Story by Nancy Miller Barton

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Student desks are pushed to the edges of the room. In the center of the open, still cluttered space, stands a group of girls, about a dozen of them. There is electricity in the air – the girls stuck in a mode somewhere between apprehension and eagerness. They’re at the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, it’s a Saturday and they’re taking part in something new. They’re talking about body image, talking about themselves – how they feel, how they look – during a seminar just for teen and pre-teen girls. What’s new is that people are listening to them, really listening.

“On this side of the room, imagine there is a sign that says, ‘I agree,’” says Karen LaShelle who is directing the group, making large sweeping gestures with her hands, “over/back there I want you to pretend there is a sign that says I disagree.” And LaShelle and her cohort, both from the Theater Action Project, proceed to read the girls a number of statements such as, “Images of girls on TV or in magazines affect the way that I see myself.” The girls scurry about like balls in a pinball machine as they decide, “agree” or “disagree.”

The inferred question is a tough one; “how do you feel?” LaShelle calls it a “values clarification” activity. The girls scamper back and forth between the ends of the room, kind of like one of those surveys that ask, do you “agree, strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree ...,” only in human-form. It’s “values clarification” and the girls are totally into it. This is the first-ever Girls Now Conference, and they can tell that with its series of workshops, like Theater Action Project’s, that they may get some information and some tools that may make being themselves a little easier. The next question is: “I treat people differently based on what they look like.” The adults in the room can guess where this is all headed, but for the girls, aged about 11-to-16, it’s a moment of discovery. Most of the girls head to the “strongly disagree” side of the room – others are scattered about, admitting “looks” might matter.

“When I was that age no one was ever having any conversations like that,” says Karen LaShelle, executive and artistic director of Austin’s Theater Action Project, reflecting on her own middle school years. People didn’t acknowledge, she says, “that yeah, it’s really stressful to have a certain body, that we’re expected to have a lot of stuff ... I just don’t remember talking about that when I was in school.” But they’re not just “talking” now either. As the name suggests, the Theater Action Project, also called TAP, takes a different approach. “We’re really more than you think of when you think of theater,” explains LaShelle, who says TAP is less like performance and more like a tool “that brings young people out of their shells and gives them opportunity to talk about themselves.” LaShelle says the nonprofit is not your traditional theater company, however most of their teachers, and many staff members, are indeed actors. “We do perform scenes and things for kids, but they get to be a part of the show with us ... or they develop their own performances.” Most of this happens in classrooms, cafeterias or gyms, not separated or aloft on a stage. But here’s the real meat of what LaShelle is trying to explain: “Anything where you can be engaging kids where they are using their entire bodies and their minds, they are going to be more focused and engaged than if you are just kind of talking at them.” And then there are the issues they take on.

So the scene, if not the stage, is set, by the time the next question at the Saturday session in the Ann Richards School classroom is posed to the gathered girls: “I feel good about myself even if others make fun of the way I look.” The youngsters spread out, as if in a line, representing every emotion between agree and disagree. One girl pipes up: “I’ve been made fun of almost my entire life,” she says. The child, who from an adult’s perspective is darling, has mousey brown hair, is a tad round and is about 11 years old. The child wears a T-shirt that reads, “I feel pretty” yet her words tell a different story. She admits to the group that she’s been made fun of, “even without my glasses.” Raw.

“We were really having some good conversations,” says LaShelle of that moment and others during the Girls Now Conference. Of the girls in this group, “they were from different campuses,” and yet, “they were sharing things that were struggles about body image, about being a girl ... to hear the commonality ... public schools, private campuses ... they saw a lot of common threads.” Generating conversation that may lead to strength is the mission of the Theater Action Project. “Teaching Artists” go into schools all over Central Texas all year long. Whether it’s early elementary and conflict resolution or older kids talking about bullying and harassment, the classroom is often transformed, the class teacher a player. In some schools TAP is part of the weekly curriculum. “Thinking about education in a different way,” says LaShelle, “education on social issues, self-esteem – those are the core things we’re really working on.”

You can find the Theater Action offices in an old Mrs. Baird’s Bread Factory on a tree-lined street in East Austin. There is no comforting smell or yeast rising, but there is plenty baking here. A number of nonprofits like Austin Area Interreligious Ministries, Dress for Success, Reel Women and the Mobile Film School, along with TAP share the space. Resident artists’ sculptures fill the lobby. The Theater Action Project offices are cramped but colorful. Papier-

mâché masks and animals clutter the floor and walls as the staff gets ready for First Night Festivities. Just five years ago TAP served 800 kids annually – by the end of 2008 that number had grown to 14,000.

As LaShelle directs the girls at the workshop to magazine ads and they ponder the implied message, “If you have a phone you’ll be popular, you’ll be happy,” adults ponder how we can help our own daughters, nieces and neighbors. If the plethora of book titles addressing body image is any barometer, we’re hungry for answers. Books like *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughter from Marketers’ Schemes* by Sharon Lamb and Mikel Brown, or *Do I Look Fat in This?* by Jess Weiner, offer us suggestions for holding our collective heads high. In *Packaging Parenthood*, the authors write, “If parents are better informed ... and learn to talk to their daughters to listen more closely to their views and learn to express more clearly their own thoughts ... they can compete with the consumerism.”

We don’t have to do it alone. While the children at this Saturday conference toss around words like Photoshop and air-brush, the folks from the Theater Action Project are doing their part simply by getting the girls to talk, think and reflect, because when they look in the mirror what they see staring back isn’t touched up. It’s real.