GirlGov
The Women and Girl’s Foundation

2020
ALUMNI IMPACT REPORT
TRAINING THE FUTURE LEADERS OF AMERICA
“Do not accept ‘no’ for an answer. I love it when I hear no because it drives me to push beyond what people think is possible.”

- Denise Jones
In 2005, the Women and Girls Foundation (WGF), led by Heather Arnet launched its first program for teenage girls. 15 years later the program has engaged nearly 1,000 girls and nonbinary teenagers in WGF’s mission: to achieve equality for women and girls, now and for generations to come. It’s clear after hearing from 300 past participants that those who engaged with WGF programming have gone on to accomplish incredible goals.

The program began as “Girls as Grantmakers,” a weekend-long retreat for a little over a dozen girls central to Allegheny County. This program soon morphed into a longer program named Change Agents. The year-long program, which has since been renamed GirlGov, includes 130 teenagers from over 50 high schools across southwestern Pennsylvania each year.

GirlGov empowers and equips its participants to become the next generation of leaders, advocates, and changemakers. The program goes deeper than other civic engagement programs through interpersonal connections, hands-on advocacy, and congressional shadowing. It equips our future leaders with confidence, content knowledge, critical consciousness and community.

GirlGov’s academic year begins in September with a weekend-long retreat, continues with bi-weekly meetings throughout the year, and culminates with a three-day trip to Harrisburg in June. Throughout the year participants take part in innovative civic lessons, engage in dialogue about social issues, gain hands-on experience in campaign development, and learn directly from elected officials and community leaders.

The alumni of these programs are leaders and changemakers who are able to identify and challenge inequality, and who know and have confidence in their identities to build stronger, more just communities. We are excited to share with you the data and stories from 15 years of program alumnae who show the shear impact the programs have had long-term, and illustrate that WGF alumni embody sustained critical civic engagement, even years after they graduate.

GirlGov helps young women translate their passion for social justice into tangible systemic change in order to help them grow into the leaders we all deserve.

- Beth Sondel, Director of Education
SARAH PESI

Sarah Pesi’s work in GirlGov culminated in the passing of “Sarah’s Bill,” a piece of legislation that allows those experiencing stalking to obtain restraining orders. She reflects on the mentorship she received in GirlGov helping her with that legislative process and its impact on how she approaches being a mentor at the JCC: “[GirlGov’s mentorship] has impacted with how I interact with others, and particularly with teens by emulating the model that Tara and Heather used with me. Working with them helped me know that I matter and my voice matters.”

The Balloets are In...

98%
of GirlGov alumni believe voting is important

82%
of GirlGov alumni believe their vote makes a difference

98%
percent of GirlGovers who are eligible to vote are registered

How Frequently Do You Vote in Presidential Elections?

The most direct successes of GirlGov’s programming is voter turnout. Our alumni are registered to vote and do vote at staggering rates. GirlGov alumni have a 28.9% higher voter registration rate compared to their peers in Pennsylvania. According to our survey data, over 83% of alumni who are eligible to vote stated that they “always” vote in Presidential Elections. This compares to a mere 47% of Pennsylvanian voters of the same age in 2016. When including alumni who marked that they “usually” vote in Presidential Elections, the voting rate jumps to 95.8%. Shifting to midterm elections, alumni still surpass their peers at 59% compared to the statewide average of 30%. With the importance of voting in local and national elections, GirlGov prepares and incites voter turnout!

“I learned so much about the importance of local and state government... and work to encourage each and every person I know to vote in every election.”

25% more
GirlGov alumni are 25% more active in local elections than their peers

2x
The rate in which GirlGov alumni vote in comparison with their peers during midterms

- Alumni 2018-2019
Meet the Alumni

The Change Makers of Today, Teaching the Leaders of Tomorrow

Every GirlGov member has their own path towards civic engagement and social responsibility. Some enter into GirlGov already politically aware and ready to build on the work they began before entering the program. Others hear about the group from friends or family members and step into the feminist organization ready to learn about political action and societal change. What they all have in common is a spark to fundamentally alter the world around them - starting with their local community, here in Pittsburgh. During our initial survey of GirlGov alumni, we noticed 4 themes emerging from the women’s responses: community, confidence, capacity, and critical consciousness. These 4 C’s speak to the mission of GirlGov and the program’s success in inspiring remarkable, engaged citizens. Each of the four alumni included in this report illustrates one of these 4 themes. We invite you to read their stories.

The Results

Questions Asked

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<th>Who</th>
<th>Former GirlGov and Girls as Grant Makers Members</th>
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<td>Open-ended questions to reflect on civic identity</td>
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All alumni interviewed were asked the same five questions.

1. In what ways are you engaged in civic life?
   a. What does that look like?
   b. What experiences in your life influenced your civic engagement?
2. What political and social issues do you care about?
   a. Explain how you became passionate about these issues.
3. How do you understand social justice?
4. What political or social figure do you identify with the most? Why?
5. How has GirlGov impacted your political and civic life?

Older alumni were additionally asked to provide words of wisdom and advice to current GirlGovers and future members.
Confidence and charisma exudes from this young activist’s work. Already politically engaged at a young age, Laila then joined GirlGov at 15. Her time at GirlGov further expanded her reach in Pittsburgh and offered an experience that was unlike any she had before or since. WGF became an ally and a supporter to Laila’s activism, particularly with direct access to Heather Arnet and Tara Simmons. The leadership of GirlGov offered “someone who was willing to work with my activism. They supported me in a literal way: helped me connect with other nonprofits, find speaking opportunities, and provided me with an award.” It was these actions, Laila notes, “that legitimized my work and had a profound impact on my confidence and access.”

Upon asking what she sees as her career path, Laila Al-Soulaiman powerfully remarked, “I have made the choice that I will dedicate my life to service.” Laila centers the importance of community and racial justice in her work in the non-profit sector. She currently works for the Advancement Project, a national organization committed to racial equity in the U.S., as the Development Manager of Donor Relations. Her work focuses on the important racial justice work happening across the country through the Advancement Project which she in turn communicates to their social justice base and the general public. Laila cites her experiences as a youth activist in Pittsburgh as leading her towards her current work: “In my early teens I got involved as a youth activist relating to issues in the conflict in Syria where my family is from. Speaking out, creating public art, and teaching in local high schools profoundly impacted the career I chose but more than that, it was my first experience using my voice to communicate about an issue that I thought was important.”

Social Justice means that every single person has a commitment to making life better for everyone.
Serena Zets is a go-getter. Before reaching 25, she has already done what many hope to accomplish by 40. While in GirlGov, Serena was active on the committee working on the role of police in Pittsburgh’s public schools. Serena attributes GirlGov with not only politicizing her but remarks how “radicalization occurred during my time in GirlGov.” And despite all of Serena’s more recent accolades and opportunities, she notes GirlGov’s programming as incredibly unique: “The experience of being surrounded by incredible, strong, informed young women who came together to learn and teach each other has been an experience that hasn’t been matched.” GirlGov’s model of community engagement, youth leadership, and a women-identified membership offers its alumni a wide-base of networking and support: “The tangible experience of meeting these people who opened doors that I wouldn’t have seen or met otherwise...It is still something I think about and talk about.”

Serena is a Sociology major with a Political Science and Gender Sexuality, and Feminist Studies double-minor at Oberlin College. She is active in the South Asian Student Association, the Asian American Alliance, and the Student Senate at Oberlin, drawing on her time from GirlGov where she learned the importance of policy. Beyond the student senate, Serena has interned with the National Partnership for Women and Families as well as the U.S. Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division where she assists the DOJ’s attorneys. This experience resulted in attending oral arguments at the Supreme Court where the Justices heard cases on pension plans and disparate impact. Serena cites witnessing Ruth Bader Ginsberg listen and respond to arguments as a highlight of the internship. Aside from RBG, Serena looks up to Dolores Huerta as “inspiration. She speaks to how change can come from the community rather than from the people in power.”

81.86% of alumni hold at least one leadership role
McKenzie Morrissey’s foray into GirlGov begins with a family friend recommending the program. After joining the organization, McKenzie began her political education and activism. “GirlGov was the first place where I’d heard the word ‘intersectionality.’” Morrissey remarks on how prior to joining GirlGov, her understanding of politics revolved around the basics of red and blue, Republican and Democrat policies and divisions.

After joining GirlGov, McKenzie’s passion for political engagement began: “I joined and then there I was at 16 on a bus to Washington D.C. with Planned Parenthood because of GirlGov.” Morrissey assisted Planned Parenthood in their trips to DC to advocate on behalf of menstrual education and easier access to menstrual products, and working as a research analyst for Bloody Bitches, a health policy research group. McKenzie also serves as the Vice President of the Black Student Union, working on behalf of the Black Lives Matter Movement and Get Out the Vote drives.

In addition to working on period policy, racial justice, and voting accessibility, McKenzie has been active in working with North Allegheny High School, her alma mater, to curate inclusive education covering both LGBTQIA and Black History. Her time in GirlGov “opened me up to my passion for government and policy. It has a lot to do with the work I am doing now as well as my ability to see the way policy is taking action and showing how far we can go.” Morrissey continues, “[In GirlGov] we were learning from women who were already in government and it gave me the perspective I have now to carry on this work.”

Social Justice can be so many different things to people. It can be protesting, fundraising, or a simple conversation with family members. Social justice has so many different layers. For me personally, it’s putting in the work. I want to do the work in public health policy to help people.
DENISE JONES
2005-2006

Denise Jones reflects on her experience with GirlGov in the program’s early years informing her current work. Learning how to navigate a seat at the table and finding one’s voice stems from Denise’s activist parents and her time in GirlGov. What was then Girls as Grant-makers, this organization helped Denise learn the importance of community building as an act of selfless work. She learned how to “keep pushing, to be a catalyst, not necessarily cite a scholar but to do the work itself.” GirlGov became a space where she felt like she belonged and had the space to do the work she was always meant to do. The time in the program, Denise recalls, “showed some of the best work we could do as teenagers - it set the bar so high, and we took advantage of the moment.”

As the program director at YES, Youth Enrichment Services, Denise oversees the diversion welfare program. This program serves as an alternative to youth services as YES works to keep youth in their communities. These preventative services offer a radical shift from the structure of juvenile care occurring post-incarceration and instead advocates for youth before they might interact with the justice system. Denise embarks on advocacy work for youth entering post-secondary institutions and provides additional documentation for student admission into universities.

This work to get students access to education speaks to her belief in the purpose of social justice: “I use the phrase ‘seat at the table’ a lot when discussing what we’re striving for. It’s not about equality. It’s not about equity. It’s about really having the access and opportunity to define a space for you to have a voice and then use that voice to advocate and speak for others.”

SOCIAL JUSTICE MEANS ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY.
IT MEANS HAVING A SEAT AT THE TABLE.
IT IS NEXT LEVEL LIBERATION.
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
BY REBEKAH CHIKUNI, CLASS OF 2020

I owe everything I am in the present and who I will be in the future to the GirlGov program. I joined GirlGov three years ago as a fifteen year old girl with no direction or any conceivable notion of my self-worth. I participated in no extracurricular activities nor engaged in social situations that I was not forced to attend. I feared the unknown and closed myself off from the world of possibility because possibility meant that there could be failure. I arrived at the information meeting (that my mom forced me to go to) on the verge of a panic attack, for the mere thought of having to introduce myself to another girl made me physically ill. Three years later, I am speaking to you at this virtual graduation ceremony. I am one of the leaders of the racial justice committee, the founder of my school's Black Student Union, and recipient of American University's Frederick Douglass Social Justice Scholarship Award. I had no idea who I wanted to be or who I could be until GirlGov. Because of this program, I plan to study politics in college and pursue an elected position thereafter. Without GirlGov, I would simply not be where I am today. I would be that scared little girl who took “no” for an answer. Today, I am fierce, loud, passionate, and most of all, worthy. GirlGov taught me to not only love my skin and hair, but my voice as well. Whether I am meeting with local representatives or community partners, I never forget the weight that my voice carries. I am forever indebted to GirlGov for all they have done for me. I know this is not the end of my story here, nor is it yours. I will see you all one day running for office or leading a non-profit. I wish you all the best on your journeys of self-acceptance and discovery, and all I can say is that I’m so happy my mom forced me to that informational meeting.

INTERVIEW WITH A GIRLGOV FATHER

Harold Chikuni discusses how his daughter, Rebekah, has grown since joining and graduating from GirlGov

1. **How have you seen GirlGov impact Rebekah?**

   The impact of GirlGov on Rebekah has been enormous. I have seen her transform from a shy girl to a strong and well spoken woman.

2. **How have you seen GirlGov impact Rebekah’s confidence?**

   Since she joined GirlGov her confidence level has increased. She is now willing to step out of the box and try new things.

3. **How have you seen GirlGov impact Rebekah’s civic engagement?**

   GirlGov has opened more doors for Rebekah and encouraged her to show her the power and the impact that civic engagement makes in the world. She now sees how participation and willingness to engage with others can make a positive impact.

4. **Why do you feel this organization is important?**

   This organization is important because it provides a sense of belonging to young girls and allows them the space to express themselves freely. It also helps them develop good communication skills like public speaking and listening.

5. **What future work do you hope to see from GirlGov?**

   GirlGov needs to continue to allow diversity of races and minds of young girls. Minority voices need to be heard all over the world.

6. **What advice would you give to other parents thinking about enrolling their children into this program?**

   The advice I would give to parents is to continue supporting the girls and encourage participation. The parents must also allow the girls to express themselves freely so that they can develop more confidence and know that their opinion matters.
WGF would also like to thank the following individuals, whose investment of time developing this program, and whose caring leadership was an inspiration to our girls:

Tara Simmons, Blayre Holmes, Amira Hunt, Maryem Aslam, Miciah Foster, Candy Castleberry, Heidi Bartholomew, Mildred Morrison, Mary Ann Dunham, Bernadette Smith, Dr. Tanya Hagan, M.J. Tocci, Nikkilia Lu, Jui Joshi, Stephanie Fedro-Byrom, Gillian Stohner, and all of the many dedicated people who served on the Board of Directors and staff, and who volunteered with WGF from 2005-2020, giving so generously of their time and talent, to ensure this program was a success. We thank you.

GirlGov provides year-round to over 100 girls representing over 50 schools in seven counties, through generous support of:

American Eagle Outfitters Foundation; FISA Foundation; The Grable Foundation; The Heinz Endowments; Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield; The Margaret Ritchie R. Battle Family Charitable Fund; The Opportunity Fund; PNC Bank Foundation and PNC Charitable Trust; Pietragallo Gordon Alfano Bosick & Raspanti, LLP; University of Pittsburgh; The Verizon Foundation.

GirlGov is also made possible through the generous support of WGF’s Wingmen, a group of leadership men in our community who have stepped up as leaders in the movement to bring about cultural change and achieve gender equity. The Wingmen serve as mentors and champions, while investing significant resources in WGF and GirlGov to support female leadership!

For more information, about how you can join GirlGov and support this program, visit: www.wgfpa.org