

Finding their voices

A women's theater group helps NYC teens harness their girl power

BY ABBY LUBY

Two years ago, a very shy 14-year-old New Yorker named Alexandra Campos tried to open up to girls she'd never met. She was encouraged by what she called a "safe haven" — a place where you could express yourself without the fear of rejection.

The safe haven is actually a self-esteem program for teen girls started by the Women's Expressive Theater, Inc. (WET), a non-profit group that aims to dispel female stereotypes. Known as the "Risk Takers Film Series," the program screens films that the girls can relate to and talk about.

"It's the best thing I could've ever done," said Campos, now 16 and a theater student at Beacon High School in Manhattan. She was back at Risk Takers last month for the program's kickoff session.

Risk Takers, now in its third year, is the brainchild of WET executive producers Sasha Eden and Victoria Pettibone, professionals in Off-Broadway theater production.

"We were frustrated by how women were seen in the media," said Pettibone. "We wanted to teach girls how to look at 'airbrushed' women with a critical eye and know they don't have to be all the images they see."

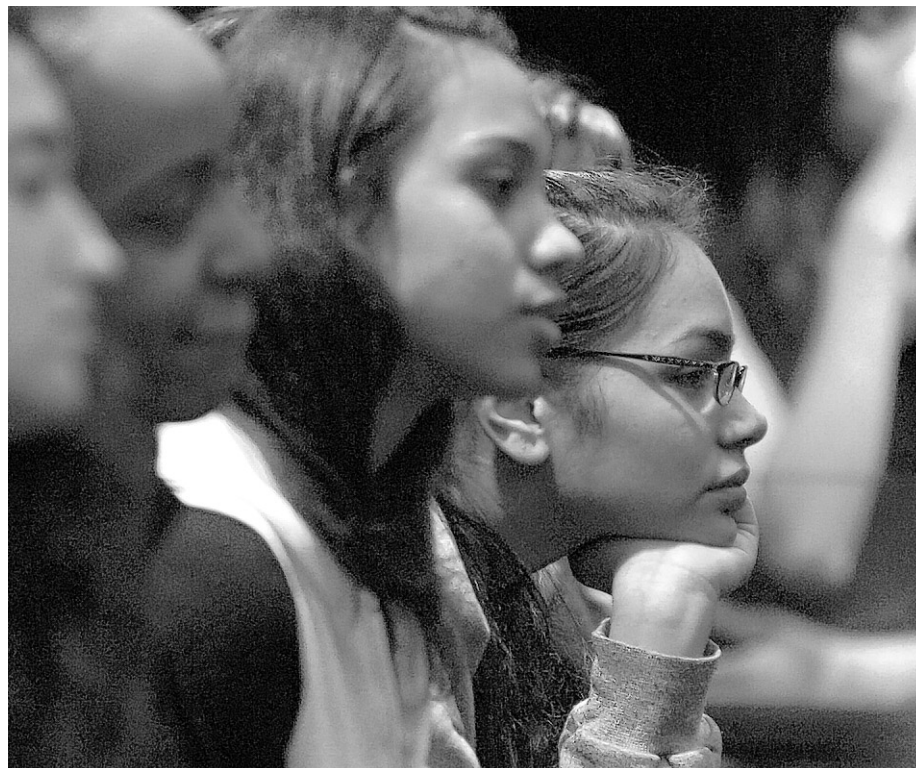
An active force of volunteers in more than 50 city high schools recruits girls ages 12-17 for the free series.

"We visit all high schools — public, magnet, private schools," said Eden. "The girls fill out a simple application and all they have to do is show up."

For one Saturday a month, girls come to the Calhoun School on West End Ave., watch a film chosen specifically for the program, then talk about it in small



Frances McDormand and WET co-founder Sasha Eden during a Q&A session with director Nicole Holofcener. Photo by Linda Rosier/Daily News



groups. After a free lunch, the teens meet the woman who wrote or directed that film.

One of the program's goals is to explore racial issues among teenage girls, but finding films about women of color can be a challenge, said Eden. "There are not a lot of movies appropriate for teen girls directed or produced by women of color."

On a Saturday in late January, a racially mixed group of about 80 girls watched "Lovely & Amazing," a film written and directed by Nicole Holofcener. Holofcener has directed episodes of "Sex and the City" and is known for her earlier film "Walking and Talking," starring Anne Heche and Catherine Keener.

"Lovely & Amazing" explores the relationship between a mother (Bren-

da Blethyn) and her two adult daughters (Emily Mortimer and Catherine Keener) who are obsessed with how they look, and a third, adopted daughter who is 8 years old and African-American (Raven Goodwin).

After a Q&A with the filmmakers, volunteer mentors with backgrounds in psychology lead discussion groups.

"The mentors try to draw the girls out," said Lisa Borneman, a clinical social worker and a psychotherapist who oversees the 30 mentors in the program. "We start with how the movie relates to the girls' own lives. The idea is to talk about body image and self-esteem and get them to access their feelings."

For 15-year-old Mischka Bedasee, speaking in the Risk Takers discussion

group was a real challenge.

"You try to feel comfortable about what you think," said Bedasee, a student at the High School of Fashion Industries. "It gives females a chance to open up and to express themselves. It gives us a voice."

Bedasee said girls talk a lot about appearance. "We want to look better to other girls — it's how we compete for guys."

When the entire group met with Holofcener, she was joined by Oscar-winning actress Frances McDormand, a strong supporter of WET and Risk Takers. The women spoke frankly and joked with the crowd during the Q&A.

"Self-respect was the key when I was a teen," said Holofcener. "I remember it was so difficult to pick new friends. I chose friends who were bad — they were cool and sexy — the girls who teased somebody and stole things. My friends didn't get me. But I had a strong moral sense."

Meeting these professional women was inspiring for 17-year-old Holland Hamilton, a student at the Professional Performing Arts School

"There is the fame factor," said Hamilton, who has been participating in the Risk Takers series for all three years. "I get to talk to these famous people and see that they are just like me."

Another perk of the program is accessing a list of internships provided by WET. Interning with a stage manager gave Hamilton a different focus on her future. "I had an amazing experience and it helped me decide that I was going to college," she said. "I'm going to Oberlin."

Campos said that the risks she took in the program were hard but satisfying.

"In the beginning, everyone has that wall up that says, 'I don't know you and I don't know what I should say.' But as time goes on, that wall starts breaking down and it's very rewarding." ♦

The next Risk Takers session is on Feb. 24 at the Calhoun School. To apply or learn more, call (212) 682-0265 or visit www.wetweb.org.