

Becoming Women

~A weekend journey marking the transition from girl to womanhood~

Our hearts raced when we got word that the bus was only minutes away from the campground in Big Bear, a mountain retreat about an hour east of Los Angeles. Soon we would watch 35 African American and Latina teenage girls step away from the cement-and-graffiti neighborhoods they were used to in South Central LA into a world of softer, natural contours - tall pines, fresh air, dirt trails, and flowing streams. The purpose: a three-day rites of passage wilderness retreat that teaches the lost, but vital skills of a healthy physical and emotional adulthood.

Drawing from indigenous "Rites of Passage" rituals, Young Women Encircle & Youth Mentoring Connection, nonprofit organizations offering mentoring and girl empowerment programs to LA youth, gathered an extraordinary staff of professional women with diverse qualifications to lead a 3 day event.

We offered these young women a series of training experiences and ceremonies with a goal as simple as it is profound: a way to uncover and embrace the girl's unique gifts so each could stand fully in her own power, both as an individual and as a woman.

On Friday evening we gathered in the lodge and began a 'Releasing & Reclaiming Ritual'. While staff members drummed and chanted a Native American song, 'Now She Walks in Beauty', each girl entered the room in silence, lit only by a blazing fireplace and candles. They entered sacred space and found their place in a circle. An African poem, 'Mother of Night', soon filled the air, honoring the blessings and unique gifts women bring to the world.

As part of the releasing ceremony, the girls listed painful events of their past on paper to be burned in the fireplace. As one participant threw her crumpled stationery into the fire, she exclaimed, "I'm releasing my fathers criticism of me", the whole room spontaneously cheered.

We completed one evening with an embracing ceremony. The girls walked to the front of the room and picked up long-stemmed roses from a waiting pile. Before placing hers into the vase, one girl declared, "I Christina, embrace the quality of endurance, trust and compassion" The room vibrated with laughter, cheering and high fives. One participant left the ritual saying, "This helped me learn to respect myself more and know I'm worth something. I learned a lot about what being a woman means."

Another gathering we focused on self-care, self-love, sexuality, and qualities needed to have healthy partnerships and relationships. The girls then painted on stones the qualities they value in relationships. On Sunday morning they would be driven to the boys camp, a similar size group of boys from south central who were just down the road at another camp who were going through the same weekend processes.

As the girls and staff members entered the boys' camp, the 35 boys escorted us down a dirt trail into a circle of grass with benches where we sat and were serenaded. They were drumming and singing "Bo Bo Malle", an African welcoming chant. This was an

amazing opportunity for the girls and boys to see one another with new eyes. They offered each other gifts of qualities that they hand painted on the 3 inch smooth black stones, qualities they value in relationships (ex: loyalty, kindness, courage, humor, etc) Both the girls and boys made comments on how they were taken aback by how open, present and generous the other was. One girl said afterwards, "I never thought that knowing myself and what I value would help me make better choices in relationships."

Sunday winded down with a trip down the mountain to a welcoming ceremony attended by family, friends and mentors to honor the first steps these young adults have taken towards adulthood. Soon participants will begin nine months of consistent and powerful mentoring - a way to continue what they learned within a support system of guidance and counseling. One of the facilitators said, "This one of the most amazing experiences, I definitely got as much value as the girls did, if not more, Wow! What extraordinary young women we have on our hands, so insightful and determined!"

One quote that keeps playing over in my mind, is one of the girls said to me as she was leaving to go home, "I came to the retreat excited about the weekend, but I'm leaving excited about my whole life!"

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