

BUSINESS WOMAN

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Girls for a Change

— By Suzanne Freed

When we hear the words "Silicon Valley" many of us think about the high-tech industry, dot coms and venture capitalists seeking more outlets for investments. But Silicon Valley is also the home of the Silicon Valley Girls Coalition which is comprised of 75 separate organizations which serve the needs of girls in Silicon Valley and the surrounding area.

This coalition surveyed thousands of girls who felt that they had no role in their communities and no access to resources and tools needed to make changes that they envisioned for their neighborhoods and beyond.

By listening to the girls surveyed, the coalition heard over and over again, "You do not have to solve the problems for us, please give us the tools we need to solve the problems ourselves." It was from these meetings that "Girls For a Change" was born.

Niko Clifford is the director of Girls For a Change, which is having its kick-off event on Oct. 10 at Great America in Santa Clara. At this event 1,000 girls will meet with 300 women to begin Phase One of this three year project. The event is girl-centered and girl-designed and will highlight workshops taught by women activists. After this, the girls will leave with action plans for their neighborhoods, schools, cities and state.

The 1,000 girls will return to their communities and meet bi-monthly in groups of 10 girls each and two women coaches. Throughout the year the 1,000 girls will reunite at community events to help fuel their passion and share their learning and skills. Years two and three will broaden the network of girls and women mentors and create strong regional girls/young women communities.

Niko talked with *Bay Area Business Woman* about the vision that GFC holds and is about to implement.

"The Silicon Valley Girls Coalition really looked at what was missing with our role with girls and young women. Where were we missing the boat? What was something new we could do for the girls and young women in these communities? Usually after workshops or trainings people are left on their own to find their way to implement their visions or the changes they see are needed.

Once we heard the feedback

from the girls themselves we began to realize that we could do something different. We could create a place where the girls would learn and go back into their communities with the ongoing support of 300 women mentors.

"In this way we will not only empower them but we will be alongside them each step of the way as the girls learn to use their new skills: critical thinking, problem solving,

"The thought of the girls doing something to change their situation so they could participate at the after-school program and not just surviving another year at school was very motivating to me. This has moved me to be part of the founding group of Girls For a Change."

Lakiba Pittman, who directs the Global Diversity division of Agilent Technologies is very involved as is Agilent, in supporting GFC.

"I initially heard about this project through my participation in the Human Relations Committee of the City of Palo Alto. There were girls who came and spoke at an event about their needs and I thought to myself, 'I am witnessing



Monthly girls steering committee meets to discuss planning and implementation of the kick-off event.

resource seeking and involvement in an interactive cyber network. We will launch them and work with them over the years of our program to build their self-confidence and self-efficiency. There is going to be a long-term alumni network, self-awareness trainings, and liaisons with corporate, non-profit and political partners.

Clifford talks about the vision in this way: "I worked for an after-school program and often there would be girls who had no way to get home after the program ended at 6:30pm. There was no safe way for them to go home at that hour so many left after school ended and would stay at home, alone, waiting for a parent to arrive after work, which would often be 8 or 9pm. I imagined these girls taking hold of the situation and calling their principal or mentor and they would lead them to their local legislator and say 'we need help with a bus from school at this hour or something to help us out.'

women in the making. I was seeing myself at that age and wondering if I would I have been so articulate, so courageous to proclaim aloud what I needed and wanted for myself or my world?"

"Here at Agilent we are very engaged in programs that encourage youth and inspire them to pursue math and sciences. We have donated to help out Stanford's flying hospital and also bought a van for the Children's Hospital. But we were looking at how to link the vision of global diversity with supporting youth of all kinds right here in our community. We wanted to reach out more broadly, empowering women long-term, investing in the future leaders of our world and to be involved as mentors and help financially as well."

Perhaps the words of Judy Kramer, an independent nonprofit business consultant and very active donor and supporter of GFC, says it all. "I have a vision of a world where women and girls participate fully in every aspect of society. With the challenges that face us, the perspectives and talents of women and girls are particularly needed. So when I consider where to put my energy and funds, I look for opportunities to bring that vision to reality." ✪

For more information on Girls for a Change call (415) 283-3334