

## Girl Talk helps students deal with middle school issues

By JON GARGIS  
jon.gargis@daily-tribune.com

An Atlanta-based nonprofit that focuses on the development of middle school girls has taken a foothold in Bartow County on its way to spreading across all 50 states.

Girl Talk, a student-to-student mentoring program in which high school girls meet with middle school girls to discuss the issues that affect them, has spread to 19 states and is nearly 10,000 girls strong since Haley Kilpatrick, a junior at Kennesaw State University, founded it at the age of 16 at her school, Deerfield-Windsor School in Albany. The program has even spread internationally, with the furthest chapter residing in Africa, in Lukasa, Zambia.

The program has 22 chapters in Georgia and has sprouted in Bartow County. Meredith Head, a senior at Cartersville High School, started and heads the program at Cartersville Middle School and has helped start chapters at Cass Middle School and Excel Christian Academy.

Kilpatrick, who remains president of Girl Talk, said she began the organization after experiencing the anxieties and peer pressures of middle school and seeing the same thing in her younger sister as she started middle school.

"It allows middle school girls to discuss the issues the face, and they get guidance and advice and positive reinforcement from their peers," Kilpatrick said.

"It's to make middle school easier for them to handle," Head said. "It's hard because there's hormones and they're growing up, and there's more challenges as they get older."

Girl Talk chapters are typically held at school before or after school hours, though chapters can also be formed through youth groups or community groups. Though chapters usually hold one hour-long meeting a week, a chapter's meeting schedule can be conformed to the needs of the members.

Each chapter also has at least one chapter advisor, such as a teacher or counselor, that can answer a question if the high school leaders cannot. The students, however, organize and control the meeting.

The girls talk about a variety of topics, such as gossip and rumors, misconceptions and myths about high school, self-esteem, community service, healthy lifestyle choices, safety issues and more. Each chapter has an anonymous question box where the members can put in their questions and members can help answer

those questions. Members are not to share their discussions outside the meeting, and they are not to mention names when they talk about situations during the meeting.

At an Oct. 5 meeting, members of the Bartow County chapters discussed the lesson of thinking before speaking, which is one of the lessons Kilpatrick tries to teach Girl Talk members across the country. The discussion utilized the "T.H.I.N.K." model, in which the girls "T.H.I.N.K. if what [they] say is True, Helpful, Important, Necessary and Kind," instead of something hurtful like gossip or untruths. The members made T.H.I.N.K. bracelets to help them remember the lesson of the day.

A chapter typically has one to five high school leaders and up to 50 middle school girls, but the numbers in each chapter can vary. "There can never be too many girls that attend or too many that lead," Kilpatrick said.

Cartersville Middle School's Girl Talk chapter draws at least 14 or 15 girls each meeting, said Cindy Gross, counselor at Cartersville Middle and the chapter's advisor. She said the group has drawn a variety of girls into its fold.

"Some [of the girls] are popular, some are not as popular. They come from all different kinds of backgrounds and they build camaraderie," Gross said. "That's important, especially in middle school, because they often feel they're alone, so the ones who might not feel they belong find a place to belong."

Gross said the club, which is in its second school year of existence at the middle school, has helped its members deal with the pressures associated with middle school and growing up.

"In middle school, it's all about the drama — 'he said, she said,' and who's dating who. This is a place to develop the skills to get along with others and maintain positive relationships with others," Gross said.

Head said she has seen improvement in the girls that have joined Girl Talk. "They definitely have a change of view of how to handle themselves, how to dress, how to choose guys, and how to be a true friend," she said.

Those involved in Girl Talk say that those improvements in a girls' life can also lead to an improvement in their schoolwork, which is one result Kilpatrick wants to see in girls who get involved in the program. "If a girl is taken care of emotionally, they'll excel academically," she said.

Gross said she also believed that if the program can help



Meredith Head, center, talks with Taylor Barron of Cartersville Middle School, left, during a recent Bartow County Girl Talk meeting as the girls made bracelets which coincided with the day's discussion.

improve the girls socially, emotionally and physically, they can also improve academically. "If they're good in those areas, it frees them up to learn in school," she said.

Creating a chapter is free, as girls willing to start an area chapter can download the materials needed to start a chapter from the organization's Web site, desiretoinspire.org.

The Girl Talk program has gotten — and is still getting — attention from the corporate world. Kilpatrick's organization recently received a \$100,000 grant from Bell Capital Management in Atlanta.

Kilpatrick was also recently named one of five finalists in "2006 Voices one voice can lead to a chorus for change campaign," an annual partnership between Charming Shoppes and The Montel Williams Show. Kilpatrick and Girl Talk were among 2,000 submitted nominations.

As one of the finalists in the campaign, Kilpatrick and the Cartersville Middle School chapter were filmed for an upcoming episode of Montel Williams. Kilpatrick will fly to New York Tuesday for a Wednesday taping of the show, and she will appear on the show's Nov. 24 episode, when the finalist who received the most votes from Montel viewers will receive a 2007 Hyundai Entourage. Girl Talk will



Haley Kilpatrick, standing center, explains Girl Talk's "T.H.I.N.K." model, which explains that girls should say things that are "True, Helpful, Important, Necessary and Kind" instead of gossip or lies about others. A videographer films the girls' discussion for The Montel Williams Show, as Girl Talk will be featured on an upcoming episode of the program.

receive a \$20,000 grant for simply being named a finalist in the campaign.

The five finalists will be profiled on Montel Williams on Fridays this month and

also in November.

Kilpatrick said she hopes to spread her organization to all 50 states by 2010. Head said she believed Kilpatrick's goal is doable.

"If I can help get three started in a year, I know we can do it," she said.

For more information on Girl Talk, visit [www.desiretoinspire.org](http://www.desiretoinspire.org).



Mary Catherine Kinney, center, a freshman at Kennesaw State and Girl Talk's 2005 National Leader of the Year, leads a discussion during a recent Girl Talk meeting.



A videographer for The Montel Williams Show films area Girl Talk members during an Oct. 5 meeting as Girl Talk and organization founder and president Haley Kilpatrick will be featured on an upcoming episode of the show. Kilpatrick and her organization are one of five finalists in the "2006 Voices one voice can lead to a chorus for change campaign," an annual partnership between Charming Shoppes and The Montel Williams Show. The finalist chosen by Montel viewers will win a 2007 Hyundai Entourage.