

Powered by Girls, For Girls: Shoreline Girls United May 30



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Shoreline Girls United, a one-day conference bringing together middle school girls to talk about topics that matter to them, takes place Sat. May 30, 9 a.m. – 2 p.m. at Guilford's Greene Community Center. Here, conference coordinator Jill Paglino (right) works with two of the day's workshop leaders, high school students Arianna Scasino of Wilbur Cross High School (left) and Maria Gonzalez of Guilford High School. The conference encourages attendance by girls in grades 6, 7 and 8 from Branford, Clinton, Guilford, Madison and North Branford.

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Ever step on a scale and see the word “Fabulous?”

At Shoreline Girls United, that’s just one of the many positive messages girls will take away.

The girl-run program, open to shoreline girls in grades 6, 7, and 8, takes over the Greene Community Center in Guilford on Saturday, May 30, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The “Yay Scale” (where positive adjectives replace numbers) and “Word Wall” (girls post words they don’t like to hear and those they want to hear more of) will be among the first activities greeting participants arriving at this concept-changing conference.

Parents can get some empowerment, too. A parents-only workshop, “What to Do When Girls are Mean,” by notable relational aggression and bullying speaker Denise Lewis (a health instructor

at Fairfield High School and past instructor of the year at Coastal Carolina University, North Carolina) takes place from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m.

But most important, conference founder and middle school guidance counselor Jill Paglino urges parents who want to help empower and inform their daughters to make sure to register them for this annual event, which provides five hours of purposeful and positive participation. Early bird registration, \$10 per girl, ends Monday, May 4; register after May 4 for \$15.

By offering dynamic workshops, activities, and discussions celebrating girls as “allies, not adversaries,” the conference aims to help girls grow personally and as leaders, and to give them tools to make positive changes in their world, said Paglino, a Guilford resident.

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Based in part on the Hardy Girls Healthy Women model founded at Colby College in Maine, the first girl empowerment conference was held last year, the result of Paglino’s gathering support, sponsors, and volunteers to present it. She’s excited to be coordinating it again this year with a committed group of volunteers and local agency members who’ve spent months planning and developing the conference through meetings, training sessions, and more.

With the help of agency sponsors Guilford Youth & Family Services, MADE in Madison, and It’s Worth It (a Guilford DAY Initiative), Paglino and her co-planners have gathered eight exceptional young women from high schools in Guilford, Madison, and New Haven to lead four inspiring workshops (attendees choose two of the four, one morning and one afternoon). The high school presenters are advised by Paglino and members of the Guilford and Madison sponsor agency staffs.

Participants will also hear heartfelt and inspiring keynote speeches during Shoreline Girls United from girls who will talk on the complications of friendship, the definition of leadership, and the ability to take on an amazing social action effort. In addition, tremendous support from business sponsors in Branford, Clinton, Guilford, Madison, and North Branford will help fuel the day with lunch, beverages, prizes, and even a free live concert (courtesy of School of Rock, Madison).

The four conference workshops to choose from are “Be-You-tiful,” which deciphers the blizzard of messages targeting appearance, then reinforces the “you” in beautiful; “Fight Like a Girl,” picking apart multiple misrepresentations of “girlfighting” while helping to boost confidence, build communication skills, and provide other conflict resolution tools; “Music Matters, exploring negative and positive messages in music pervading girls’ lives, and helping consider how the music really makes them feel; and, for any girl with a spark of social action in her heart, “Power Hour” will help fan the flame and provide ways to effect change in her community, or the world.

In fact, keynote speaker and Power Hour co-presenter Anna Ayres-Brown, a senior at Hopkins School in New Haven, was just 13 when she took on McDonald’s corporation as a social activist. The young teen wanted to ban gender-specific toys given to girls and boys with Happy Meals.

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“Anna was really bugged that when you would go through the drive-through at McDonalds, they’d say, ‘Do you want the girl toy or the boy toy?’” said Paglino. “So she figured out how to get a hold of the CEO of McDonald’s, and they have since changed their policy, and are now supposed to ask, ‘Do you want a Strawberry Shortcake or a Transformer?’ If a 13-year-old can pull that off, then everybody can realize they can send an email, sign a petition, make a phone call. But I don’t think middle school girls think of themselves as social activists.”

Ayres-Brown’s keynote address is titled “Taking on the Toys.” Read Ayres-Brown’s essay on her action [here](#).

Arianna Scasino, a senior at Wilbur Cross High School and Power Hour co-presenter, founded a mentoring program at a middle school in New Haven.

“Through my high school, I got involved in Future Project, which creates projects based off our passions,” explained Scasino. “Mine is a girls’ empowerment project called The Confidence Tour. It’s a mentoring program for 7th- and 8th-grade girls, and I’ve been doing it for three years. I go to Worthington Hooker School every Friday, and we talk about life and whatever they want to talk about.”

Scasino said she’s excited to be co-presenting Power Hour because she remembers wanting to get involved with social activism as a middle school student.

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“The main goal is to show girls no matter how old they are they can make a change,” said Scasino, who joined a Peace Jam chapter as a 13-year-old, and recalled, “We had an awesome teacher who got us involved in signing a petition to get the Violence Against Women Act passed. I want to show girls all those little things you can do to make a change. No matter what age, it’s possible.”

Guilford High School senior and workshop co-presenter Maria Gonzalez is looking forward to inspiring at Shoreline Girls United, too.

“We’re hoping our workshop will inspire the girls to take charge and listen to things that make them happy and feel good,” said Gonzalez.

Gonzalez will co-present “Music Matters” on May 30.

“Younger girls, I notice, seem to be always listening to music, and so it’s a big part of their lives. I feel like it’s important to recognize the messages they’re hearing, because sometimes you don’t notice, but you become affected subconsciously by the words being sung,” said Gonzalez. “And so by looking at printed-out lyrics [and] images displayed in music videos, we’re hoping to get girls to distinguish between positive and negative messages and help them to discuss how lyrics of certain songs make them feel—if those images may be influencing you in a negative or positive way.”

The idea is to reinforce finding positivity and providing empowerment, as it is with all workshops planned for the day.

“I really like the idea of everyone loving themselves and really appreciating what makes them happy,” said Gonzales. “I really want to promote that to the girls, and I think that’s what I want them to take away from the whole thing.”

Scasino recognizes the valuable and unique opportunity Shoreline Girls United offers to assist 6th-, 7th-, and 8th-grade girls.

“Being involved with it makes me I wish I could have gone to a Girls United conference when I was in middle school,” said Scasino.

Shoreline Girls United, a conference for shoreline girls in grades 6, 7 and 8, takes place Saturday, May 30 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Greene Community Center, 32 Church Street, Guilford. To register, call Guilford Youth & Family Services at 203-453-8047 for a permission form to complete and return with registration fee. Register before Monday, May 4 for \$10 per participant or after May 4 for \$15 per participant.

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