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Porter: How one leader makes a huge difference

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"Nasty." "Disgusting." "She's your godsister? You have to talk sense into her!"

A minute inside Natasha Burford's classroom, listening to the chatter, all my residual girlhood insecurities ache. I remember acutely how hard it is to be a teenage girl.

The class is part of a camp for girls, aged 10-14. Three are leading a session on social networking from the front of the room. They've posted the two female archetypes on the blackboard — one posing seductively in booty shorts, the other in a turtleneck clutching a Bible. Their point is not to judge a book by its cover. But also, the cover is important.

"You have to be mindful what you put up on the Internet," instructs an immaculate girl — royal blue blouse, hair twisted into a Princess Leia bun. "People jump to conclusions."

After the facilitators leave, Burford gets up from behind her desk. "Do you know how old those facilitators are?" she asks. "They're 13 and 14."

Eyes widen. That's younger than many of the girls in the room. And they're already facilitators?

"That's why they're called aspiring leaders," Burford says. "They're aspiring to be leaders in their own community."

Her point: You could be more than a slut or a nun. You could be a leader.

Burford is the force behind a small non-profit in Jane-Finch called WORCIT — Women of Race Climbing It Together. Its main project is a 10-month "aspiring leaders" program for 13- to 17-year-old girls in the neighbourhood. It is equal parts girly sleepovers and motherly heart-to-hearts, and includes leadership workshops on things like financial planning and public speaking, and enriching experiences, from spending a weekend in University of Toronto dorm rooms to visiting Uncle Tom's cabin in Chatham. To graduate, all the girls have to lead workshops, like this one today.

"I want them to have that sense of entitlement — that they could do anything they want," says Burford, 33. "I want them to dream as high as possible, and then achieve that."

The program is Burford's small solution to the merry-go-round of violence many ride in her neighbourhood.

Up till three years ago, she was riding it too.

She grew up in social housing, the middle child of two working immigrant parents. Both her siblings were arrested when they were kids, she says. She saw friend's faces on the evening news. A boy she used to meet after school at Finch station was stabbed to death at the CNE.

Then, one Thursday night three years ago, Burford was at her part-time job, coordinating children's programs at a local community centre. The mother of a boy Burford had once tutored stepped into her office, crying. Her son had been arrested for dealing drugs. She needed to talk to someone, and she chose Burford. A switch flipped inside her.

"All these boys being murdered in the neighbourhood," Burford says, reflecting. "I had been waiting for someone to do something. When she



Natasha Burford started WORCIT, a program for girls in Jane-Finch to excel. Kids in background are (l-r) Trysten Burey, Mary Ampomah, Schanelle Campbell and Mayah Boateng.

KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

came, I thought 'I can't wait anymore.'”

Her action: an email to friends and fellow recent teachers college grads asking for help coordinating “Toronto’s First Black Women’s Leadership Conference.” Responses came and the next spring they pulled it off, drawing 200 people to hear keynote speaker Jean Augustine, the former Liberal MP.

The mentorship was a natural progression, for what real changes could come from a weekend conference? They chose girls, Burford says, because that is what they knew best. And in addressing youth violence, girls are often overlooked.

“The decision-makers are often men. Women often suffer, but don’t take an active role to find solutions,” says Tatiana Fraser, executive director of the Girls Action Foundation, a national charity working to build girls’ leadership. “What Natasha is doing is brilliant.”

That summer, they kicked off the aspiring leaders program with a month-long girls’ camp. Burford pulled every string she could find, hiring teacher friends, bringing her financial planner to talk money matters, persuading her mom to lead cooking classes. Next month, three young graduates from the program will help lead this summer’s camp.

“They’re really matured over the years,” says Burford. “We’ve been watching them grow and flourish, and we thought this would be an opportune time to let them lead.”

Meeting Burford, I was struck by many things. She’s tall and loud and confident. The girls in her class wear belly tops and short skirts. She wears jogging pants. And she wears them well.

She might have felt poor and lost as a girl, but you’d never tell by listening to her. She has a golden tongue, making even a pedicure session sound like a transformative learning experience. Burford brims with passion. At teachers college, she was known for her outspoken opinions on social justice, former classmate and WORCIT board member Sharron Rosen says.

“She’s walked her talk,” Rosen says. “Everything she’s giving to the community, she’s lived as a youth. She doesn’t step out of this role. This role is in her.”

What’s most amazing, perhaps, is her energy. When she started the program, Burford had one little son. Now there are three — all under 4 years old — she’s raising with her husband, a factory worker.

She works two jobs — Grade 7 teacher by day, recreation coordinator by night. Where does she find the time to run a NGO, host sleepovers and plan annual conferences?

“My friend says I was meant to have only boys because then I’d still have energy for girls,” says Burford. “This is my free time.”

To the girls, Burford is like an older sister — watching over them with both encouragement and a sharp word. Her expectations can make her “scary,” they say.

“We realize she’s only doing this not because she cares about herself. It’s for us. She wants us to grow from these experiences,” says Enoruwa Osagie, 16.

Osagie is the program’s poster child. When she arrived at the first girls’ camp three summers ago, she wore a tie. She was anti-social and hated girls, who had bullied her at school. She rarely spoke. Three years later, she has led board meetings, organized a WORCIT winter festival and landed a job as a researcher at York University.

“It’s made me into a completely different person,” she says. “I wouldn’t even have handed in an application before. I’d have been too afraid to go out and indicate my interest.”

Do you know a Dreamer and Doer? Email: dbeer@thestar.ca