

The Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill Girls' Leadership Workshop

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill (ERVK) Girls' Leadership Workshop delivers programs each summer to educate, empower, and activate adolescent girls to become the next generation of social justice leaders. The primary objective of the Girls' Leadership Workshop (GLW) is to create a more just world by preparing young women for future positions of personal, political, and professional leadership, using the example set by Eleanor Roosevelt.

At Val-Kill, Mrs. Roosevelt's country home and retreat in Hyde Park, New York, high school girls celebrate the life and legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt, develop their leadership skills, and strengthen their commitment and confidence to make a difference in their communities. With Eleanor Roosevelt as a role model, the Girls' Leadership Workshop helps girls believe in themselves and achieve their dreams.

The Girls' Leadership Workshop reaches girls during a critical period in their development when many young women may become distracted and sometimes derailed by societal pressures, rigid gender-role expectations, and plummeting self-esteem. As a counterbalance to these challenges, GLW builds on the legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt by promoting human rights, gender and racial equality, and the responsibilities of citizenship. The Girls' Leadership Workshop:

- nurtures active citizenship, sisterhood, and concern for social justice.
- teaches leadership skills, attitudes and behaviors.
- builds the self-awareness and self-confidence needed to exercise leadership.
- encourages personal strength, discipline, courage, and compassion.
- introduces positive role models and presents a wide-range of future career options.
- increases knowledge about women's history and women's current concerns.
- exposes girls to examples of positive leadership action, locally and globally.

Each spring girls are selected from hundreds of applicants entering the tenth and eleventh grades of high school. The participants of the Girls' Leadership Workshop constitute a diverse group of exceptional girls from across the United States, and increasingly from outside of the United States. Girls are selected based on their demonstrated commitment to community service and social justice, maturity and leadership potential, and academic and extra-curricular achievement. The cost of this program is subsidized, and GLW offers additional scholarships based on need. In this inclusive environment, learning and growth occur through the rich interplay of the diverse regional, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds of those who gather at Val-Kill.

More than 50 inspiring presenters and mentors share their experiences and areas of expertise with the girls throughout the two workshops. GLW participants receive professional training in leadership skills such as public speaking, challenging bias, fundraising, conflict

resolution, and team building. Other workshops focus on human rights and social justice activism, community service, journal writing, women in politics, international diplomacy, women's history, and the legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt. GLW engages and challenges girls of exceptional promise to reach their fullest potential—intellectually, emotionally, and socially.

In addition to summer programming, GLW sponsors an online email network to provide a forum for ongoing exchange between GLW graduates. Using this forum, girls continue to support, involve and inform each other about their exciting projects and leadership activities. ERVK continues to support girls after they return to their schools and communities through a “Young Women in Action” program. Through this program, GLW graduates are encouraged to apply to ERVK for mini-grants to support their social justice leadership projects in their home communities. GLW Reunions and Symposiums are held every few years to encourage networking and relationship-building, and to support GLW alumnae in their world change leadership efforts.

GLW encourages and enables girls to live the life described by Eleanor Roosevelt as “brave, exciting and imaginative.” Girls return to their schools and communities feeling as if they are starting new lives of purpose and action where they can and will make a difference. The girls report substantive growth in their understanding of and appreciation for the leadership exercised by Eleanor Roosevelt. They leave with enhanced personal confidence, willingness to take risks, relationship-building skills, knowledge of women's history, knowledge about social justice and human rights, commitment to challenging bias, leadership skills, and expectations for their own futures. The graduates of the Girls’ Leadership Workshop are making a positive impact on the world by continuing the work of Eleanor Roosevelt to promote human rights, racial and gender equality, and the responsibilities of citizenship. They become part of her living legacy.

“Because of GLW I have more interest in social change. Learning about Eleanor Roosevelt, her life and her career, I find myself seeking to emulate her compassion and fervor for helping to better the world she lived in, so that I may, in turn, better the world I live in. I do not believe anything is out of my reach just because I am a woman. I have found my voice and speak out against things I feel are wrong and speak up when things I care about go unseen. There are many things in the world that can be improved and it only takes one person who cares to start a reformation.”

– Sara B.

BACKGROUND

The Girls’ Leadership Workshop (GLW) was developed in response to a need, emphasized at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, for additional resources for girls to develop the self-esteem, confidence, and skills needed to exercise leadership as socially engaged adults. In 1996, a Sub-Committee of the Board of the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill formed to design a leadership program for high school girls. This Sub-Committee worked with the Executive Director, staff, and a Girls’ Advisory Committee to develop and implement the first GLW in 1997. Subsequent single GLW sessions occurred in 1998 and

1999. Since the summer of 2000, there have been two GLW sessions each year and the workshop has grown from a regional to a national and now international program.

It All Begins With Eleanor . . .

The Girls' Leadership Workshop draws inspiration from Mrs. Roosevelt's own girlhood experience. At age fifteen, Eleanor Roosevelt went to England to study at Allenswood, a French language boarding school run by the progressive feminist Marie Souvestre. Mlle. Souvestre provided a rigorous education while encouraging intellectual and spiritual independence and social responsibility. She helped her students to develop the courage to recognize and enact their personal vision. Young Eleanor, a shy, self-described "ugly duckling," blossomed under her tutelage. It was at Allenswood that Eleanor was first recognized by her peers as an inclusive and compassionate leader and developed relationships that lasted a lifetime. Reflecting on the impact of her mentor, Marie Souvestre, Mrs. Roosevelt later wrote, "Whatever I have become since had its seeds in those three years of contact with a liberal mind and strong personality." GLW strives to provide a foundation for girls to grow into strong, independent women with a deep sense of engagement, as Allenswood did for Mrs. Roosevelt.

The Girls' Leadership Workshop is based at Val-Kill, Mrs. Roosevelt's beautiful country retreat in Hyde Park, New York. Visitors to Val-Kill experience the grandeur of nature blended with the intimacy of a great woman's simple home. Mrs. Roosevelt came to Val-Kill for renewal, often bringing with her the great and famous, relatives and friends, world leaders and local youths. She considered this her "one true home", and said that "Val-Kill is where I used to find myself and grow. At Val-Kill I emerged as an individual." Her inspiring spirit is ever-present.