

Girls learn skills, make friends at YWCA Girls Centre

Some 500 girls a year get the encouragement they need to become role models, mentors and community leaders at the United Way-supported program.



LESLIE FERENC / TORONTO STAR

Samar Hossain, 15, left, a member of the YWCA Girls Centre, is 11-year-old Noor Sahi's mentor and friend.

By: Leslie Ferenc Staff Reporter, Published on Mon Oct 29 2012

Chicks rule at the YWCA Girls Centre in Scarborough where young ladies are speaking their minds, sharing opinions and exploring the world around them.

And as they do, they're shaping the community where they live.

Opened seven years ago, the boy-free zone is where girls have fun as they make new friends, learn skills and design the programs they want, including how to be a DJ, cooking classes and book club. It's where girls — about 500 of them a year — get the support and encouragement they need to move forward as role models, mentors and community leaders.

There's no other place quite like it.

Noor Sahi, an 11-year-old Grade 8 student at Bliss Carmen Senior Public School, has been a regular for two years and liked it so much she brought along her younger sister, Shabnam. Among the programs Noor joined was the Healthy Living Spa where girls learn about making good life choices.

The new Ms. Media Camp is a weekly digital media program for girls 11-13 offering workshops that build technical skills in journalism, social media and digital media. Mentors help them hone their skills. United Way Toronto provides funding for many of the centre's programs.

"I enjoy everything about the centre," Noor said, adding it's a safe and comfortable environment where girls can be themselves.

Samar Hossain, 15, a member of the centre's Girls Council, is Noor's mentor and friend. She's also a great role model.

"Samar is someone who gives advice when you need it," Noor offered, adding there's nothing they can't talk about. Discussions about timely issues such as cyber bullying, self-image, how advertising portrays men and women, and even which member of the boy band One Direction is the biggest heart throb are always lively.

"Sometimes, girls don't have a lot of support," said Noor, who wants to be an astronaut, adding the centre is where all ideas are nurtured.

Samar, a Grade 11 student at R.H. King Academy who is planning a career as a pediatrician, came to the Kingston Rd. centre three years ago to make friends and learn skills. She's been attending five days a week ever since.

An advocate for community safety, Samar took part in the Safe Sisters self-defence program. She also learned about world art representing the diverse community of newcomers in Scarborough. There were sports and summer camps and, on the more girly side, she loved learning about makeup from girls' program worker Michelle Pena.

"I liked it all so much, I didn't want to leave," Samar said, adding she joined the Girls Council to be a voice for girls and develop programs, to do her part for the community and stay connected with the centre.

"It feels good to be a role model," said Samar, noting she's learned just as much from Noor. "Aside from my sister, I didn't really have one but I believe a role model is beneficial to young girls. A role model impacts lives for the better.

"I'm proud to be a mentor and changing the community step by step."

Noor is right behind her.

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