
THINKING
OUTSIDE THE
GIRL BOX

Teaming Up with Resilient Youth in Appalachia

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Introduction

When I Fell in Love with Shelley Gaines

Every good love story has to start with a time and place—you know, to set the scene—and this one is no different.

It's the spring of 1999. I am sitting in my university office, surrounded by menacingly tall stacks of student papers and scribbled field notes from ongoing research projects. A large wooden sculpture sits perched on my desk, spelling out a message that my husband and daughters think I desperately need to be reminded of each day: "RELAX." As one of the few qualitative research experts in the area and a lifelong "yes" addict, I am severely overcommitted. My next meeting is with a Shelley Gaines, and my plan is to have a brief chat and then regretfully decline to work with her—"*Your project sounds fascinating. If only I had the time!*"

Enter Shelley: baby on one hip, bright smile on her face. Radiating enormous energy and optimism, she tells me about the Girls' Resiliency Program (GRP), in Lincoln County, West Virginia, a community non-profit aimed at helping girls identify strengths, become active decision makers, and advocate for social change. Shelley describes how it began with fewer than ten girls in one school and quickly grew to include almost one hundred girls in three schools. Being in the program, she explains, means monthly after-school discussions about everything from day-to-day happenings with friends to the roles and rights of girls and women. It means regular out-of-school activities, such as volunteer projects, art workshops, and social outings. She talks about the poor, rural county with

little in the way of facilities or programs for youth and about the hard lives of the girls served. As she speaks passionately about this grassroots, “girl-driven” program focused on developing leadership in Appalachian youth, I feel my own enthusiasm growing. *Oh boy, I’m in trouble.*

But this was an unfair battle to begin with; given my personal and professional interest in gender equity, Appalachia, and community development, I never had a fighting chance. Shelley’s intense commitment to the girls in Lincoln County was palpable. By the time she left my office that day, I had agreed to conduct evaluation research for the program. What I didn’t realize then was how long the research would go on and how much it—and I—would change along the way. Although the research questions multiplied over the course of the project, at the outset they were fairly broad and simple. I wanted to understand what the program meant to the girls, how it played out in their lives, what aspects of it they valued and why, and what they were concerned about.

I think about long-term ethnography as a long-term relationship. I have a commitment to stick with it, to represent people fairly, to seek and present accurate information, and to learn lessons that can be used in other relationships. In the case of this study, I committed myself not only to my research students and to the teen girls in the program but also to the staff and board members, whose fierce devotion to rural youth is extraordinary. And to the woman whose passion I fell in love with that first afternoon, Shelley Gaines—the woman with the vision.

Every good love story also needs strong characters. In fact, it may need those above all else. Hence, the telling of this story is people-centered. Each chapter uses an individual and her or his experiences as a springboard for telling a piece of the organization’s history, as well as for discussing key issues that arose in our research. Although my research teams did not collect the life histories of individual girls, the book in its entirety might be understood as a life history of an organization.

You’ll notice the first-person singular writing. My daughter, Layne Amerikaner, who joined the project in 2010, cowrote the book. She and I had to decide what voice to use, what our presence should be in the writing. We agree with Corinne Glesne that first person singular is fitting for qualitative work, especially given that I was the lead researcher for the project. “The presence of ‘I,’ ” writes Glesne, “says that yours is not a disembodied

account that presumes to be objective” (2011, 236). The decision to narrate it in *my*, rather than *our*, voice is fully explored in the methods chapter.

I’ll be frank up front: this story does not have an unequivocally happy ending. In the late ’90s and early 2000s, the Girls’ Resiliency Program flourished. Its accomplishments were significant, at times astonishing: the girls recorded their own CDs, published poetry, conducted action research, opened a coffeehouse, performed an original play, and held political rallies in West Virginia’s capital. The organization won national awards, and funding flowed in. By 2005, however, the program was struggling to survive. At the same time that programming responsibilities grew, grant funds became harder to obtain. Frustrated and burned out, Shelley Gaines, the founder, resigned, and other staff followed. The program began to shrink, serving fewer youth in fewer schools with fewer staff. Today, summer 2013, the organization is nonexistent.

Those of us still involved (my role as “university researcher” doesn’t keep me from counting myself as someone “involved”) are left with the common end-of-love-story refrain: *What happened?* What made it work so effectively when it did, and what caused the decline? Is it possible to get back to the healthy, thriving organization of the 1990s? What does all this mean for the girls’ lives? What can this story contribute to knowledge of youth development? Of adolescent girls? Of rural Appalachia? This book is an exploration of those questions, as well as an exploration of the research methods—what we in my field call “collaborative ethnography”—themselves. In each case, lessons learned—our research results, if you will—are woven into the story as it unfolds chapter by chapter.

Chapter 1 is where I lay out the setting of the story, Lincoln County, West Virginia, by way of introducing Ric MacDowell, who has lived and worked with youth in the area for more than forty years. Using Ric’s experiences as a starting point, the chapter explores the poverty of the county and of West Virginia generally, much of which was created by the exploitation of local resources and people by large, out-of-state companies. I learned, as have others before, that local context matters in youth development work. More specifically, I learned about (1) the physical and social challenges of rurality for programs with youth whose homes are geographically remote, whether in Appalachia or elsewhere; (2) the importance of long-term relationships between youth and caring

adults—even with individuals initially viewed as “outsiders” in close-knit communities; (3) the bitterness of poverty as experienced day to day by adolescent girls; and (4) the girls’ critique of, and resistance to, stereotypes of the region and, more specifically, the assumption that West Virginia girls are incapable. Finally, chapter 1 reveals the girls’ ambivalence about their home county, which they love but plan to leave someday.

Featuring Shelley Gaines, the founder and long-time director of the resiliency program, chapter 2 lays the foundation for the rest of the story. It describes the organization’s early successful years and presents our research findings about resiliency and positive youth development—from the vantage points of adults who worked with the program, girls who participated in the program, and members of the community where the program was located. As has been true for other positive youth development programs, the idea that youth are capable, rather than in need of repair, was a core belief for adults who founded the program. Still, this belief was complicated by concerns that emphasizing group activities to build leadership might have unintentionally let some individual youth with pressing needs fall through the cracks. For girls, many of whom joined initially for the fun activities, the resiliency program meant being with caring adults and friends who could be trusted in safe, girls-only spaces where they could think in new ways about storms they had weathered. In the community, the program raised a few eyebrows. The fact that it was only for girls and that it explicitly challenged sexism was threatening for some. Reactions were hostile at times, including accusations of lesbianism, which is discussed from the perspective of a lesbian member of the group.

Chapter 3 features the transformation of Teresa, who joined the program at age twelve and stayed until its collapse. Drawing on Teresa’s story, I explore the issue of “voice,” tracing her journey from being virtually silent in the first year of the study to confidently vocal a few years later. Her transformation was related to two kinds of program experiences: arts activities (poetry, songwriting, photography, pottery) and community action research. Teresa’s story illustrates the benefits that can come from investing substantial human and fiscal resources in activities that invite girls to acknowledge, express, and act on their views and experiences. In relaxed but structured activities led by professional artists, girls named and portrayed personal life events (sometimes quite painful ones) and were met

with respect, encouragement, and suggestions. Original poetry and song lyrics are included in the chapter. The summer research internship was another activity in which Teresa and other girls were expected to speak and be heard—in this case in their community. The structured, paid research internships, including a university research workshop, were transformative. As interns, their jobs were to identify community problems and design research to learn more about and alleviate the problems.

In chapter 4 we meet Cassi. Whereas Teresa was one of the first girls in the program, Cassi and her friends were among the last. Cassi's experiences provide an opportunity to explore two other key aspects of the program: its focus on healthy relationships and its challenging nature. The focus on healthy relationships was explicit and pervasive in the program. On a day-to-day basis, adult staff members modeled positive relationships and coached girls as they sharpened their own relationship skills—the ability, in one staff member's words, “to trust,” “to be open,” “to be loved, to care about another person.” The coaching was a blend of nurturance and challenge. Adult staff listened, but also talked back, to girls—raising questions, offering ideas, and at times directly challenging their thinking. The program challenged girls in other ways, too, by requiring them to try, in the words of one girl, “a thousand new things.” Many new things, whether a trust fall in a ropes course, white-water rafting, or Chinese food, made the girls feel “scared to death.” Girls who accomplished difficult tasks in the context of supportive relationships came away with expanded senses of their own capabilities. Cassi credits her relationship with a GRP staff member for her ability to overcome a long-standing fear of art, to successfully create pottery, and eventually to become, in her words, the “extraordinary and confident person” that she is today. Girls were especially pleased when their accomplishments made positive and noticeable community contributions, such as the coffeehouse they opened and the house they built for Habitat for Humanity. Program staff found it harder, though, to engage the girls in social activism. The chapter examines this issue, taking a close look at the group's involvement in anti-school consolidation activities.

Outspoken Irene and quiet Virginia, both of whom were girls in the program for five years and then became GRP staff members, come into the story in chapter 5. Their experiences illustrate the successes and struggles

that can occur when participants become program deliverers. Moving girls into staff positions strengthened girls' ownership of the program. But it did not decrease staff turnover, a major challenge for the organization, and it may have diminished, rather than strengthened, staff effectiveness. Two related factors are key to understanding why some transitions from participant to staff were smoother than others, and in understanding the lack of success of this ambitious endeavor generally: timing and training. Transitions were more successful when girls took a longer, slower path to becoming staff members working directly with other girls. Beyond increasing girls' ownership of the program and enhancing staff stability and effectiveness, Shelley had hoped to strengthen the local community by "nurturing what's here," or making it possible for capable people to stay and work in Lincoln County. This happened to some extent, but it may have been at the expense of the organization. The decision to groom girls for staff positions and to preferentially hire local individuals—even when they had lesser qualifications than outside applicants—contributed to the group's downfall.

Graduate student researchers LeAnne Olson and Betty Sias are introduced in chapter 6. With the youth resiliency programming—the focus of their doctoral dissertations—unraveling, they gradually became *de facto* program staff. The chapter explores reasons for the program's collapse, the nature of the researcher/staff hybrid roles that Betty and especially LeAnne played as a result of the collapse, and overarching lessons learned from the study. In analyzing the program's collapse, three factors not already addressed in prior chapters are pinpointed: (1) overreliance on a single individual, namely Shelley Gaines; (2) declining funds for nonprofit work generally and specifically for projects featuring social justice activism for girls; and (3) untimely and underresourced program expansions. The chapter also explores how LeAnne and Betty negotiated—uneasily at times—a researcher/staff role that evolved with the program's decline. For the girls, the blurry line between researcher and staff was mainly an opportunity to develop trusting relationships with other caring women. For their part, the graduate students were rewarded with unusually deep, full understandings of the girls (and in Betty's case, the boys) and their lives.

Finally, the chapter discusses the GRP as an effective positive youth development program and presents four more general lessons learned from

the study: (1) programs with atypical missions or strategies may suffer from a lack of role models and training about how to solve problems they encounter; (2) seeking balance, rather than a complete shift in one direction, is a more sustainable way to resolve organizational tensions (for example, between hiring short-term versus long-term staff or hiring insiders versus outsiders); (3) although there are no guarantees of success for new programs, major benefits—for individuals and for communities—can result from making commitments to them anyway, even programs that are not sustained in the way that was originally intended; and (4) there is value for organizations in being willing to change and grow in response to new information and circumstances. Beyond these four lessons, I—along with others who participated in the project—learned what girls’ lives are like in this particular space and time, unquestionably important new knowledge.

The program ended, but the girls’ lives went on. In chapter 7, featuring Ashley, I trace the experiences of five girls who were high school juniors when the program ended. Coauthored with LeAnne and based on her dissertation study, the chapter follows the five former GRP girls through their senior year of high school and into the first two years of college (or other postsecondary circumstances). From the study, I learned about barriers, as well as about factors that were helpful, in making the transition to college. The key issues were money, math, moms, mentors, and “me” (referring to each girl’s own agency). In addition to money problems for four of them, all five girls faced obstacles related to mathematics. The girls’ relationships with their mothers were helpful in many ways, but there were also family-related barriers. Finally, their association with LeAnne and their own agency were factors in their transitions from high school to college.

Chapter 8, featuring Layne and me, is about research methods. It traces the twists and turns of the process as it evolved over the years of the study. I began the research viewing myself as a qualitative program evaluator and ended up in the role of a “collaborative ethnographer,” teaming up with adult community members and high school students. For Layne, who joined the project more recently, it was a transition from being an undergraduate anthropology student raised here in Appalachia to an author writing about “others” with different experiences of the region. The process of writing the book together transformed our mother–daughter

relationship, opening new connections between us. In addition to our personal research journeys, the chapter highlights tensions related to doing community-based collaborative research with youth. The first tension relates to power, voice, and language, raising questions about whose voices are heard, what words are spoken and written, and how those decisions are made. A second and related tension concerns the balance of participation in the research. Who does how much of which tasks (e.g., data generation, analysis, presenting, writing)? We examine the feasibility—even the desirability—of the research work being evenly distributed when there are unequal resources for participants and in a rural context where transportation is a real obstacle to youth participation. We conclude that the collaborative methods were a strength of the study. They produced knowledge that is truer, closer to the experiences of the perceptions and experiences of the people involved, than it would have been had we used traditional ethnographic methods. The collaborative nature of the research let us explore differences in our understandings—for example, about what positive youth development *is*, anyway—that were important to constructing a full, relevant analysis of the project overall.

But this isn't just the story of an organization's trajectory; it's also a story about girls. I want to make sure that their voices are heard. These girls have things to say. At times they are heartbreaking; other times they are funny, insightful, sarcastic, trivial, profound. This book is the culmination of the fourteen years I spent asking questions of and listening to adolescent girls in rural West Virginia. Most of the studies and discussions of "girls" that I have encountered do not focus on poor, rural girls. But following the insights of feminist scholars of color such as Chandra Mohanty, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Smith, I understand the importance of centering one's research in the experiences and understandings of some of the most marginalized members of a group.

Because of a long history of exploitation, Lincoln County is one of the poorest areas of West Virginia, a state that is one of the poorest in the country. The girls in this community identified by teachers and counselors as good candidates for the resiliency program face some of the most severe adversity. I remember Shelley reflecting about the fear of letting the girls into her life—the risk involved in opening her heart to their stories and experiences: "I think a lot of times people put up this barrier which keeps

them from being genuine, from letting other people get really close . . . because it's painful to do that when you're connecting with people who don't have happy-go-lucky lives." It is painful. And yet, I have found that avoidance of pain in ethnographic research—or in relationships generally—drains it of meaning. I believe Ruth Behar is on to something when she writes, about her own field of anthropology, that research "that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore" (1996, 177). That said, power differentials are important here. Compared to the girls, who cannot just choose to disconnect from tough aspects of their own lives, Shelley and, for that matter, others of us who are part of this project have the luxury of more choices about making painful connections.

Scholars of this region write about Appalachians' deep connections to place. Anyone who has lived in these mountains knows the truth of this characterization, whether long-term "transplants" or natives. This holds for me, as well. These are my mountains; this is my place. Like Laurie Thorp, who conducted research with youth in her hometown—a place to which, she wrote, she had decided to "declare her loyalty"—I want to use this research to "make something happen" in a place to which and with a group of people to whom I have made a commitment (Thorp 2006, 2, 147).

Still, much work needs to be done in this country before we take the voices of Appalachian girls seriously. My part of the country is still characterized, to put it bluntly, as a bunch of ignorant hicks. "We *know* Appalachia exists because we need it to exist in order to define what we are not," argues historian Ronald Eller on the place my region holds in our national identity. "It is the 'other America' because the very idea of Appalachia convinces us of the righteousness of our own lives" (2008, 3).

The righteousness of our own lives, indeed. In 2009 TV personality Bill O'Reilly gave us a startling example of this view when he proclaimed that "the culture in Appalachia harms the children almost beyond repair. . . . There's really nothing we can do about it" (King 2012). He went on to argue, "Kids get married at sixteen and seventeen. Their parents are drunks. . . . Look, if I'm born in Appalachia, the first chance I get, I go to Miami."

So here is one story about a group of West Virginians who didn't move to Miami, who value their home, while acknowledging the challenges that come in an area of deep poverty; here is a love story about a

group of teenagers and adults who understand the hurdles faced by rural West Virginia girls and reject the defeatist mind-set that “there’s really nothing we can do about it.”

Once upon a time, I fell in love with Shelley Gaines. Here, in a collection of prose, poems, interview clips, songs, field notes, sketches, and reflections, is the story of what happened next.

Thank you for your interest in this Ohio University Press title.

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