Teen Girls
Re-Vision East

A report from the Women’s and Gender Studies Program

DePaul

Researched and written by Irene Clare Beck, Ed.D and Beth Skilken Catlett, Ph.D
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Conduct your blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.

—Gwendolyn Brooks, Illinois Poet Laureate
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Acknowledgments

As academic researchers, we wanted our proactive role to provide a wider forum for the teens’ voices beyond their neighborhood of Rogers Park. In order to publish a monograph in both English and Spanish, we explored connections that we were indeed privileged to access. We sought and obtained a grant from the Vincentian Endowment Fund, supported by the Vincentian Fathers, the founders of DePaul University.

The university itself has a long, strong mission toward education of its students about and involvement in community-related issues of social justice. Our project embodied this mission by forging a unique partnership among faculty, students and community residents that forwards a social justice agenda while affording unique opportunities for learning and community service within the ethical parameters of Vincentian Catholicism.

Additional external funding enabled us to hire a student research associate, transcribing and second-language-translation services. Beyond seeking a wide readership at the time of publication, we also sought and found a permanent home for the project materials, in the Special Collections and Archives section of the Richardson Library at DePaul University.

We are especially grateful to Father Ed Udovic, Secretary of the University, Senior Executive for University Mission, Vice President for Admissions and President of the Vincentian Endowment Fund (VEF) for his leadership and belief in our research initiative. Without the VEF’s support, this monograph would not have been published.

Two leaders in DePaul University’s Women’s and Gender Studies Program have spanned the duration of this project: Dr. Elizabeth Kelly and Dr. Ann Russo. Beth Kelly, the immediate past Director of the program, had the vision that gave birth to our collaborative work. Ann Russo, our present program Director, has helped us see this project through to its completion. We are deeply appreciative of their vital roles in creating this monograph.

Brian Maj, our research associate, was invaluable in many large and small ways, from contributing vital ideas about the shape of this research, facilitating our work with the teen girls, and providing remedies for urgent glitches, to managing myriad logistics that kept our research team moving.

We also want to give special thanks to the students in our Winter Quarter 2003 courses, WMS 212: Growing Up Female in America, and WMS 303: Women and Violence. They provided valuable insights into issues of race, class, gender and multi-ethnic culture as they relate to adolescent girls and young women. Their participation was critical to the making of this research. We’re also appreciative of their respect for the flexible process we all engaged in as qualitative researchers.

Our collaborative work relationships with faculty, staff and administrators in other disciplines at DePaul University expanded the learning of our student interns as well as enriched our own perspectives on participatory research. Associate Vice President Susan Leigh has generously lent her support and led us to Dr. Lenora Inez Brown, Assistant Professor of Dramaturgy. In her remarkably approachable and affecting way, she worked with the teen interns to develop a long-lasting strategy for translating the teen girls’ words into a dramatic presentation. Doris Brown, Associate Vice President for Teaching and Learning Resources at DePaul University, agreed to permanently house the life narratives research data, materials, and monograph in the Special Collections and Archives section of the Richardson Library on the Lincoln Park Campus.

Among the many ways she has collaborated with us, Kathryn DeGraff, Department Head, Special Collections and Archives at the library, prepared an individualized tour of the archives for the teen interns, led by Katharine Laroche, Student Assistant. These weekly experiences offered the teen girls more than their first tastes of university academic life; it also provided them with individualized
opportunities to picture their future selves engaging in such work. We also are indebted to Kathryn and Doris and their staff for hosting our Spring 2004 exhibit and celebratory event marking the publication of this monograph. This event highlighted a dramatic performance by Family Matters’ teen girls, staging excerpts from their own voices.

We have been continually impressed with the outstanding work of Kim DeLong, founder and Executive Director of Family Matters, the award-winning community program for youth and their families in East Rogers Park. She uniquely embodies the phrase, “the power of an individual to make a difference”. We highly praise all that she has created and accomplished; we deeply appreciate her providing access to her staff, teens, and their parents. And as she would quickly add, Kim has surrounded herself with staff leaders who, as part of the organizational team, foster remarkable growth in their youth members. We particularly want to thank Tawanna Brown, Director of the Teen Girls’ Programs at Family Matters. She formed with us a true collaboration in every step of this research project, from initiating the original idea to facilitating access to the teen girls and their parents, to regularly brainstorming with us about any needed next steps as we made our way together in this journey to help the teens’ voices to be heard.

While the two of us were primarily responsible for writing this monograph, we very much appreciate the contributions of our compatriot researchers—the young women of Family Matters. The teen girls gave us so many gifts—their ideas, experiences, concerns, talents and trust. Words cannot express how much we admire their courage to voice their views. They have our true gratitude. The adult alumnae who gave generously of their time, memories and insights, shared with us recollections that expanded and enriched our view with voices from the recent past. We thank them heartily. We benefited tremendously from the dedication of the teen summer interns who worked to ensure that the teen girls’ voices resonated on these pages and their perspectives were accurately represented. They also joined the design team that created and displayed the art work for this publication.

We hope this monograph does justice to all their voices, their dreams, and their lives.

Finally, for endless patience while our research consumed what often seemed like constant attention, we are very grateful to our families. Irene thanks her husband, Bill, in particular for reading chapters, making us bottomless pots of coffee, and embodying true feminism himself. She also thanks their grown “children”, Dan, Jim, Stephanie, Chris and Robin, for their support of this work, understanding the social justice related to these issues and living these beliefs themselves. Beth wants to acknowledge her daughters, Samantha and Tessa, who over the years not only have learned to spell the words “feminism,” “gender,” and “equality,” but also have begun to appreciate their meaning and significance in our lives. Beth also thanks her husband, Steve, in particular for his editing expertise and his full embrace of her successes and joys.

Thank you!

Irene Beck & Beth Catlett

As a final note, we are indebted to Efrain Perez, Jr. of NE & Associates, Inc. whose painstaking, detailed work in translating the monograph text into Spanish made this bilingual monograph possible. Additionally, the publication of this book would not have been possible without the fine abilities of the DePaul Publications Group.
Executive Summary

This monograph is the written expression of a project that has been rewarding in a surprising array of ways. When we began our research, we hoped it would enhance the empowerment of a group of urban teen girls of color from low-income families who were members of a thriving community-based leadership program. They lived in a gentrifying neighborhood in Chicago and were facing a host of age-related, family-related and community-related issues.

We planned to connect the teens with our DePaul University students in two of our courses by designing a life narrative project in which the teens would be interviewed and their words developed into a published text. We hoped that through this process, our students would increase their awareness of a central objective of feminist research: that the complexity of diversity issues and interlocking oppressions of sexism, racism and classism can profoundly impact the lives of real young women in our own urban community. We also sought to work with the teens as they gave voice to their views, framing their words in writing that many others would read.

Much of existing research highlights the multiple risks, problems and deficits associated with growing up as an adolescent female of color in an urban community of low-income families. Throughout our research project, we found that challenges did, indeed, exist in the teen girls’ lives. However, what we found even more compelling after getting to know these young women is their resilience, their many insights, and their commitment to ensuring a successful future for themselves and their families. Resiliencies resonated throughout the teens’ narratives; their adaptive capacities to translate risk into opportunity came through clearly. Remarkably, several young teens have already participated in public advocacy for community change.

In studying the teens’ words, several prominent themes have emerged: their concern for street safety, the need for adequate prevention of bullying, harassing and assaults at school, their concerns about the shrinking pool of affordable housing units in their neighborhood, support for the complex relationships they encounter within their families and with peers, and for their hopes and plans for the future.

We want to emphasize the most prominent themes that were embedded in the girls’ narratives. These are the subjects that they really wanted to talk about. They created the focus of our interviews; this is what was on their minds:

Views of Rogers Park: Inside & Out. We saw paradoxical perspectives emerge as the teens talked about their community—their own perspectives and how they thought others might view the neighborhood too. Their narratives were often layered with ambivalence, complexities and contradictions: the teens recognized dangers in their neighborhood, yet they also voiced a strong sense of pride as well—this is my community. This inner conflict may well be related to their adolescent developmental need to feel safe and protected in their own environment, despite its real threats. This may also be a natural defensive posture as a response to verbal attacks from peers outside their neighborhood. When the teens described more general impressions of their neighborhood, they were smart about ways to deal with challenges in their community. They were particularly proud of the diversity that surrounded them. In their view, cultural and racial differences offered great opportunities.

Street Safety. We saw that the teen girls viewed sexual harassment, both verbal and physical, on the street as normal, everyday interactions, even though they were frustrating and annoying. These incidents seemed to be a “rite of passage” that went with the onset of puberty, which disturbed the young teens’ sense of safety. Sexual harassment by adult males is a highly visible part of the landscape of daily life in the teens’ neighborhood. The teen girls frequently described incidents of being stalked by older males on the streets and in cars passing by or following them. They also decried what they saw as a lack of serious attention paid by the police to these matters. As a related issue, they were frustrated by the lack of respect that their male peers showed in their verbal and physical behavior in public, especially close to their school. Since all of these incidents have been repeated frequently in public, in clear sight and within earshot of other adults who do not stop these behaviors, the teens have come to view these offenses as virtually unstoppable.

Affordable Housing. The teen girls’ interviews showed a deep concern about the “gentrification” of East Rogers Park. Many of the teens’ families, friends and neighbors have been displaced, sometimes more than once, while they search unsuccessfully to find a new way to stay in their rapidly changing community. They were troubled about the loss of jobs as local stores closed down and residents were forced to relocate great distances from their current jobs. They also expressed a sense of isolation, feeling that the new, fancier, or more expensive commercial chains opening in their neighborhood were not intended for
them or their families and friends. As the face of the neighborhood changes, it is the low-income individuals and families that are extremely limited in their ability to maintain the stable community they had created. The teens were very troubled that many of the low-income families seemed forced to confront these unsought challenges in isolation.

**Education.** We saw throughout this project that these teen girls are smart, committed, and hard-working. We also saw that there is a real risk of their losing that focus in the absence of institutional support. Their primary concerns revolved around peer related issues, such as chronic behavioral disruptions in the classrooms and hallways. Harassment, bullying and peer violence were primary concerns. They also needed guidance in planning ahead for future classes and extracurricular activities. There did not seem to be much interaction between parents and school staff. Several were active in sports, yet these were not offered at their school. However, the teen girls participated in and benefited from late afternoon tutoring provided by their schools.

**Friends.** Female friendships were complex and troubling to many of the teen girls. Yet the young teens and adult alumnae all clearly cherished strong bonds between themselves and close female friends. The young teens seemed unaware of the implicit gendered competition of the “second sex” vying for the “prize catch” of a male that underlined frequent squabbles over make-up, attractiveness and ability to get and hold onto a boyfriend. They spoke positively about their friendships with boys. Yet we also saw that the teens were reverting to traditional female socialization patterns when they came to choosing boyfriends. They very much wanted to participate in dating and romance. In personal writings some of them shared with us they characterized themselves as caretakers of budding relationships, constantly critiquing conversations. The teens also described experiences and expressed varied views about dating older men. They expressed a need to know more about legal and ethical issues involved in such relationships.

**Families.** Our work with these teens debunks the myth of the pathological single parent family headed by a woman that is so perpetuated in our culture and in our social science research. These girls’ descriptions of their families broke the stereotypes. Although the families were by no means perfect, the girls’ descriptions were characterized by love, support and commitment. The teens also described their mothers’ involvement in their lives, which we saw as attempting to prepare their daughters for success in a world that they know will present many challenges. Moreover, we were impressed with the active presence of positive male figures even in the absence of live-in biological fathers. We saw and heard many examples of the general need of every family to have multiple external supports.

**Activities.** In any given week, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays after school belong to activities at *Family Matters.* When they were not there, the teen girls said they could be found staying late at school for enrichment sessions, or attending tutoring programs, on soccer fields and basketball courts, in the library, at home doing homework, or at part-time babysitting jobs. On weekends, they were busy with family commitments and activities with their friends. Although every afternoon after school was accounted for, all the teens described homework as their primary responsibility. At an age when many girls find female friendships hard to come by and to sustain, *Family Matters* has encouraged teens to bond and to lead. Indeed, as alumnae reflected on the positive messages that they took away from growing up in East Rogers Park, they all identified *Family Matters* as what influenced them most.

**Future Research.** The impact of racism and poverty are two topics that we want to talk about with more focus in future research conducted with the families of these teen girls. In our interviews with the teen girls, we asked them if they had experienced racism. The teens did not identify any racism connected with larger societal or cultural issues in their community. Only one teen related a personal incident, apparently race-related, that happened far away from East Rogers Park. However, we think that if we asked them questions in a more focused way they would be able to identify the ways in which racism has/had not shaped their life experiences.

Although many statistics indicate that households with children headed by single mothers often are economically poor, this is an area that we did not explore in depth with the teen girls. In our interviews, we asked if money were a problem in their families. None of them identified particular troubles as they directly answered that question. However, in later answers, the teens indicated that they were keenly aware of the financial limitations they, their families and friends faced in trying to find and keep affordable housing. And so, we recognize that this is an area that could be explored in greater detail with the mothers of the teen girls in a future research project.
Teen Girls’ Project Background

“We see the truth... then we speak our minds”
“We see the truth...then we speak our minds”

These words frame a giant display like a banner, proclaiming the message of the teen girls we’ve come to meet at Family Matters, a community program in the North of Howard section in East Rogers Park. Countless eyes of all shapes and colors, clipped from photo ads and pasted below the banner words, watch us gather at the broad table below: “We see the truth...” Many magazine mouths open as if to pour streams of words into the ears of invited guests: “…then we speak our minds”

This message was just the reason we were there. As faculty in the Women’s Studies Program at DePaul University, we came to plan with these young women ways to give voice to their experiences and views. We also sought ways to connect them with the work of our college students. Irene Beck has had a long-standing supportive relationship with Family Matters and had involved teens from its programs several years earlier with a gender equity project she coordinated with the American Association of University Women in Illinois. The teens had become youth leaders in that statewide initiative. She has maintained frequent contact with Tawanna Brown, director of Sisters of Struggle (for older teens) and Sisters in Unity (for younger teens). Tawanna had met several times with Irene and her colleague, Beth Catlett, whose expertise includes families and women and violence.

She described for us a community action project that some members of the Sisters of Struggle had created in 2002, in collaboration with BeyondMedia, another not-for-profit organization in Rogers Park. During that summer and fall, the teens had photographed and videotaped life in East Rogers Park. From these images they made a video, Our View from the Red Line. This project also set the stage for them to shape their own perspectives. The goal of the project was to help the teens become community youth leaders.

Throughout that experience, the teens had also chronicled some deep concerns of their neighbors in East Rogers Park. Affordable housing was an issue that enveloped the blocks and buildings in which the teens, their families and friends lived. While Rogers Park was undergoing a new wave of urban gentrification, many local residents had been displaced from moderate rental apartments, rapidly developed into high-priced condominiums. A few succeeded in securing permanent living replacements while many relocated out of the neighborhood. Some have continued the challenge to stay connected to their community, even if that meant being displaced several times.

Beyond the turnover of residents, urban gentrification has also altered the commercial face of East Rogers Park. The teens noted that they’ve watched familiar “Mom and Pop” stores disappear, leaving behind vacant storefronts. At the same time, they’ve seen a brand-new supermarket appear. However, they greeted its coming with ambivalence. One teen expressed a commonly held view: the new store was targeted toward the soon-to-arrive rich customers, not for people like her and her family, being forced out of their no longer affordable community. Yet Our View from the Red Line also told a different type of story—how a successful group of low-income families banded together and won city approval to build a community center on a lot best suited to meet the neighborhood’s needs. This victory empowered many in the low-income community with a sense of control over their surroundings.

This new-found sense of empowerment was undercut for the teens by the research they undertook. As they looked for community background information for their leadership project, Tawanna Brown later recalled that the teens were stunned by the absence of any public collection of photographs or written history about people of color in East Rogers Park. Additionally, they were offended by descriptions of their neighborhood that were posted on various web sites. They were appalled by negative portrayals of the particular area called “North of Howard,” which is where Family Matters is located. Gale Academy, the grade school where many Family Matters students have attended, is just down the block. Both institutions are central to this area.

The teens resisted public perspectives that characterized their local streets as full of danger emanating from crime, drugs, prostitution, and from poor immigrants and people of color. Those negative images demeaned streets they saw as far from mean. They saw those views as stereotyped and incomplete, excluding diverse individuals they knew as neighbors, relatives, friends, role models and mentors. They also strongly felt that such negative stereotypes most certainly did not apply to them. And so, a project that had started as a learning tool for youth leadership had led to some unexpected negative consequences. The teens’ exposure to largely negative public portrayals left them feeling disempowered, invisible and voiceless.
Rogers Park Background

Given these prior experiences, we were happy to find the teen girls at Family Matters eager to talk. They spoke of concerns for their neighborhood and challenges presented by urban gentrification. Their statements reflected the reality of real estate developers converting rental units, which previously reaped monthly rents of several hundred dollars, into luxury condominiums, with the expectation of selling them for several hundred thousand dollars. Many teens characterized this phenomenon as “unfair.”

We recognized that these youth had not yet examined the larger context within which their experiences unfolded. And so, beyond capturing the intensity of their perspectives in this monograph, we researchers also felt compelled to provide a frame of reference for their views. We searched for historical information about Rogers Park and have primarily relied on several sources, cited in this text. Indeed, it was striking to find in our research that two of the concerns identified by the teens also repeated themselves throughout the history of Rogers Park: high levels of transition among its residents and scarcity of public information about local people of color.

Transition in Rogers Park has brought continuous waves of ethnic and racial groups, ebbing and flowing in and out of this community. Conflicting tensions related to such changes have rarely swelled into overt group conflicts, yet the community’s very existence was drawn from a peace treaty following a military encounter. Land that later became Rogers Park was fought over in military skirmishes between the U.S. Army and the Portawatomi Indians in 1821. When the Native Americans were defeated, they ceded the area south of what was then called “Indian Boundary Line”, and is now Rogers Avenue. (Pacyga & Skerrett, 1986).

Following in the path of Phillip Rogers, an Irish immigrant who became the first white settler in the area in 1834, newcomers of Irish, Scottish, and German descent soon farmed along the western boundary of the community by Ridge Road (Samors et al., 2000). Ridge Road, the only north-south passageway for years, became an important military, mail, commercial and stagecoach route. According to Pacyga and Skerrett, local lore held that Rogers’ son-in-law, Patrick Touhy, built a mansion for his family a generation later, on the previous site of the wigwam of Black Partridge, Chief of the Portawatomi tribe. Touhy then organized other settlers to declare the local area the village of Rogers Park. Its boundaries were defined: Lake Michigan to the east, Ridge Ave. to the west, the Evanston town line to the north, and Devon Ave. to the south.

Although Rogers Park was only ten miles from downtown Chicago, it remained isolated with a small population until the Chicago and North Western Railroad completed a route through the area in 1873. More residential buildings sprang up close to the train stations. Train tracks later became something other than a magnet for new building. The elevated tracks of the Howard Avenue line, constructed in 1908, also drew a visual break between East and West Rogers Park. Newcomers apparently preferred vast vacant land with fertile fields to the west of the “el” tracks over marshy wetlands closer to the lake. However, the southern part of Rogers Park near the lakefront was not as marshy as the northern area, and so that part of East Rogers Park was deemed desirable for both developers and institutions such as Loyola and Mundelein Colleges. Between 1907 and 1914, the population of Rogers Park began its first growth spurt, increasing from 2,000 to 10,000 residents.

Up to this point, according to Samors, a small piece of land at the northeastern edge of Rogers Park, now known as North of Howard, had been even more remote than the rest of the village. Known in the early part of the twentieth century as “Germania”, for its few German immigrant residents, this strip of land first had been part of South Evanston. However, it was particularly isolated from the rest of that city, locked in by the lake to the east, the Milwaukee Railroad freight train tracks to the west, and separated from the rest of Evanston by Calvary Cemetery. By 1915, it was considered a “No Man’s Land”, lacking lighting, paved streets and police protection, unlike the rest of Evanston or Rogers Park. In that year, Rogers Park annexed the strip of several streets called “Germania”, increasing the village’s territory and providing the small area access to Chicago’s vital services.
Over the next decade, this became the fastest growing area of Rogers Park, with developers building many three- and four-story apartment buildings, as well as commercial properties along Howard Street. By the 1920s, that street had become a new commercial district in the neighborhood. In 1922 alone, the Chicago Daily News reported that 1,500 apartment units were under construction in the Rogers Park area east of Clark Street (Pacyga & Skerrett, 1986). These historians wrote that one developer enticed families to the area by promising each renter a space in an apartment basement for a baby carriage. In addition, he offered a play area for every six apartments, and a $25 savings account to be opened for each baby born while families lived there. This building boom of multiple rental units greatly increased the community’s population and transformed East Rogers Park into a densely populated area. Still, the rest of Rogers Park was mainly a community of single family homes. By 1933, when Lake Shore Drive was extended to Foster Ave. and then connected to Sheridan Road, drivers had a direct avenue to downtown Chicago. At that time, Rogers Park’s reputation became established as a desirable middle-class urban community, attractive to white-collar workers and businesses alike.

No single ethnic group has consistently dominated throughout the social history of Rogers Park, creating a strong pattern of ethnic diversity. However, there was a strong monolithic racial pattern early on: the community was predominately white from its earliest settlements until the second half of the 20th century. Prior to 1950, as tides of immigrants flooded into the Chicago area, many Germans, Swedes and Poles found homes in Rogers Park, seeking, as Pacyga and Skerrett said, to “assimilate into the American way of life.”

After World War II, the local population of East European Jews grew steadily on the western border, where large tracts of land were still available for temples and synagogues, along with new homes close by (Samors, et al., 2000). The number of these Jewish newcomers swelled to 20,000—fully one-third of the 60,000 residents of Rogers Park then. Most of those newcomers came from the Lawndale section of Chicago, which was undergoing racial change: blacks were moving in and whites were moving out. Still to come was the wave of suburban emigration that washed over the urban community of Rogers Park, just as it did across much of America throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

The community climate in the North of Howard area declined after World War II. Howard Street had prospered in earlier years because it was a transfer point for many train commuters, traveling south to the rest of Chicago or north to Evanston and other northern suburbs. As historians Pacyga and Skerrett indicated, saloons were permitted on Howard Street in East Rogers Park after the Prohibition Era had ended in 1933. This was in contrast to Evanston and its adjoining suburbs, which retained a ban on liquor, a legacy of Northwestern University’s charter. As a result, Howard Street was the “last stop” for North Shore residents buying liquor and a popular spot for college students, as well. During World War II, soldiers from Fort Sheridan and sailors from the Great Lakes Naval Training Base frequented the Howard Street saloons, contributing to the district’s reputation as a transient area.

In response to the housing shortage following the war, spacious courtyard apartments in East Rogers Park were subdivided into smaller units. While white families moved to the suburbs, construction of new high rise buildings along Sheridan Road helped to bolster the population decline. However, such construction also gradually changed the community’s racial and class composition. Many units were built as studios or small apartments with kitchenettes, which, by design, were not intended for growing families who might be seeking permanent homes. A long row of nursing homes built along Sheridan Road in the 1960s - 1970s provided housing for approximately 1,300 elderly and disabled individuals, whose numbers remain approximately the same at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Throughout the ’60s and ‘70s, Rogers Park community members responded to such changes with growing concern that they transformed into social action. Pacyga and Skerrett reported that, with the cooperation of area churches and synagogues, the Rogers Park Community Council and other organizations became powerful forces to combat such problems as deteriorated housing, aging commercial strips, and shelter care facilities. “Few Chicago neighborhoods have as clear a sense of direction as Rogers Park,” they maintained. “Its success as an urban neighborhood seems to be directly related to [the community residents’] carefully cultivated identities.”
However, part of those cultural identities included some stigmatizing of at least one area. According to Pacyna and Skerrett, by the 1960s, other Rogers Park residents referred to the North of Howard area as the ‘Juneway Jungle’. Data from the 1970 U.S. census estimated that half of the African-American population in Rogers Park and one-fourth of its Latinos lived in the North of Howard area. To aid poor families in this part of the neighborhood, community groups organized legal aid programs, food pantries, and English-language classes for Hispanic and Asian newcomers.

However much that neighborhood may have been previously stigmatized, it was about to undergo yet another change in the 1980s. In 1982, a unique program that cost almost 20 million dollars was jointly funded by private enterprise and city, state and federal governments. The innovative program undertook the rehabilitation of twelve courtyard apartment buildings in the North of Howard area. The extensive renovation and landscaping of these buildings dramatically changed the appearance of this part of Rogers Park. Property owners in the vicinity reportedly began to upgrade their buildings as well, further enhancing the success of the project. Newcomers to Rogers Park in that decade included Latinos, Koreans, Caribbean, Vietnamese and East Indian immigrants, making their way, forming churches and opening shops. By the mid 1980s, new Caribbean, Mexican, Korean, Polish and Chinese restaurants and delicatessens opened on Howard Street, contributing to greater stability in the area.

Besides striking changes in businesses at this time, there was a substantial shift in population. The following numbers and percentages are estimates; additionally, respondents were allowed to enter more than one race in recent census filings. According to 1990 U.S. census data, approximately 9,000 blacks moved into Rogers Park in the 1980s while nearly 8,000 whites and other non-blacks moved out. Indeed, between 1980 and 1990, the white population of Rogers Park decreased from 70% to 45% of its residents. However, in the most recent decade, 1990-2000, the number of whites held virtually constant, gaining slightly to 46% of the total population. In the same twenty-year period, the number of Rogers Park’s African American and Latino residents grew significantly. Between 1980 and 1990, the African-American population in Rogers Park increased from 9% to 26%. In the following decade, 1990-2000, the black population further increased to 30% of the community’s total population. Paralleling this growth, the Latino population increased from 12% to 20% between 1980 and 1990. It then increased further to 28% between 1990 and 2000. So while the total population of Rogers Park has remained quite constant for half a century at about 60,000 residents, its racial and ethnic makeup has changed substantially.

A key piece of statistical information might be useful in understanding this population change. For decades, 85% of Rogers Park’s housing stock has been comprised of rental units. This likely has contributed to the reality that this community reflects the same demographic changes as that of Chicago. Overall, Rogers Park’s changing ethnic and racial diversity more closely resembles the profile of the entire city of Chicago than any other neighborhood (Guentert & Pepper, 1992). While most city neighborhoods typically have been made up of one or two racial or ethnic groups, Rogers Park has maintained a unique mix that mirrors the larger city profile of diversity.

Rogers Park has maintained a unique profile in another way. In the later decades of the twentieth century, larger governmental policies and programs shifted away from community problem solving. Still, Rogers Park has a decades-long history of many not-for-profit groups, along with numerous block clubs, which have become significant forces for resident-based activism in shaping the community’s development. One contemporary example of this form of community activism in the North of Howard area is the Gale Community Leadership in Action (GCLA), described later in this paper. Formed to provide local residents with a forum to address concerns that impact the North of Howard community, it has led to a community wide effort to obtain a neighborhood playground and community center.

However, it is disturbing to note that there is a dearth of publicly available information about contemporary non-white populations in East Rogers Park. Whatever negative stereotypes remain in people’s minds of low-income families, immigrants or individuals with racial and ethnic backgrounds other than their own, these stereotypes are left unchallenged by such public silence. It has been startling to note that, apart from several individual quotes on a wall of Chicago’s major historical museum dedicated to a permanent exhibit on affordable housing, we were unable to access any information publicly written or narrated by the residents of East Rogers Park themselves. Even more disturbing was the reality that the area’s local museum had no archival material nor photographs of people of color that have resided in Rogers Park for more than half a century. It is our hope that these written narratives that follow will break this pattern of silence, as the teen girls re-vision their community of East Rogers Park.
Project Evolution

For us, “Teen Girls Re-Vision East Rogers Park” evolved naturally as a collaborative effort sparked by Dr. Beth Kelly, then-program director of DePaul University’s Women’s Studies Program. She encouraged us to develop stronger academic bonds beyond the typical borders of colleagues passing in the corridor. Beth Catlett, a Visiting Professor with assignments in the Women’s Studies Program and the Sociology Department, came with a strong teaching interest in families and a rich background in activist research, focusing on women and violence. She was drawing students to learn both quantitative and qualitative research methodology through a study with the Circuit Court of Cook County that captivated their interests, developed their analytical skills and energized them about social justice issues. Beth also published scholarly studies and reports based on her work.

Beth Catlett has researched women and families and violence in intimate relationships over many years. Her commitment to both research and teaching and the reciprocal relationship between the two has been the hallmark of her professional life. Throughout her career, she has made a deliberate effort to engage in a process of critical self-examination. For example, she has often wondered why, as a feminist of privilege, she is inclined to work with and study women with whom she has not clearly visible common base of experience. The insights gained from exploring these questions have strengthened her commitment to and ability to forge connections with other women, working with them to conduct research that makes a difference in women’s lives.

Irene Beck, a part-time Women’s Studies program faculty member, had designed and taught a course, Growing Up Female in America, that brought her professional background in advocating for gender equity for youth into the DePaul University classroom. Her statewide work with and writings about school districts and community organizations exposed her college students to effective program models and activist role models that embodied textbook theories. Irene also wanted to act on an abiding drive to capture the untold stories of female lives. Having grown up Brooklyn-Irish Catholic, her family moved from low-income to middle-class status in her youth. From her first home in a South Brooklyn housing project, an awareness of social injustices carried her into civil rights action programs in her late teens, to training Head Start educators, to developing curriculum for at-risk students, to embracing gender-equity education. Now a wife, mother and stepmother of four grown offspring, she values the tremendous gift of family support and has seen first-hand the enormous value of education as a tool for individual empowerment and forwarding social justice.

Following Beth Kelly’s suggestion, we rapidly recognized what she had envisioned: we could create a collaboration that would meld our efforts, building toward greater benefits for our students as well as for our own scholarship. Along the way, we have also crafted a unique relationship based on friendship and fellowship, and a shared passion for the social justice issues in community-based research.

Even before the actual project got underway, we held countless conversations both at the college conference table and our kitchen counters: How would the central tenets of feminist research apply to this project? What would the project design encompass? What outcomes and products would possibly emerge? How could we best involve our students, given the need to protect confidentiality of the young teens? How should we accommodate the time constraints of our ten-week quarter and scheduling limitations? What funding sources should we seek to support our project?

These questions led us to develop a project that would include one-on-one interviews with eight teens, ranging in age from 12 to 17. These would also be written narratives drawn from those transcripts, and a monograph with that text and photos taken by the teens. Throughout the 2003 Winter Quarter, our college students would also be introduced to the feminist methodology of life narratives, researching effective ways of portraying such narratives, and creating ideas for the monograph that would disseminate this information.

One of the first stories that needs to be told is the remarkable role of Family Matters in the lives of these teens and their families. Beyond the particular individuals it has served, its place in the community must not be understated. It clearly has become a wellspring of skills and attitudes that the teens have turned into

“Few Chicago neighborhoods have as clear a sense of direction as Rogers Park. Its success as an urban neighborhood seems to be directly related to [the community residents’] carefully cultivated identities.”

— (Pacyga & Skerrett, 1986)
resiliencies, as they’ve grown within its programs. *Family Matters’* strengths include its intentional aim toward personal growth and leadership development, its clear and consistent paths toward that end, and its unique role-modeling and mentoring provided by unflagging adult commitment to the youth, their families and community.

When Tawanna Brown sought parental permission for the teen girls to participate in this project, we all were gratified by the openness and willingness of mothers to consent to their daughters’ participation. We all were more than delighted when several replied that they also wanted us to let them tell their own stories next. We consider such parental support and interest another testament to the trusting bond that exists between *Family Matters* and its participating families.

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**Family Matters Background**

For the past fifteen years, since opening in 1987, *Family Matters* has worked to achieve its goal: to facilitate a way for families in the North of Howard neighborhood in East Rogers Park to experience their world as a place of possibilities and opportunities. Programs that provide learning opportunities for neighborhood children include: *Family Connections* (ages 5-12); *Sisters in Unity* (younger teen girls); *Sisters of Struggle* (older teen girls); *Brothers of New Direction* (younger teen boys); and *Brothers on the Move* (older teen boys). These also aim to enhance the youths’ leadership abilities and support them in expanding their world.

The 150 children and their families who participate in *Family Matters* programs support its core values, the “Principles of Leadership”:

- Embracing peaceful conflict resolution
- Owning choices and consequences
- Harnessing the power of positive thinking and language.

In everyday life, as Kim DeLong, executive director of *Family Matters*, says that participating parents “commit to teaching their children choices and consequences, so that children learn to think and act independently, critically and responsibly. Youth work courageously to deepen their camaraderie by finding meaningful ways to express their concerns, even when those concerns are difficult to share and hear.”

*Family Matters* opens doors beyond its programs as well. It seeks to connect families with the community, strengthening efforts that encourage them to be agents of positive social change within their families, their lives and their neighborhood. *The Gale Community Leadership in Action* (GCLA) was formed to provide local residents with a forum to address issues that impact the North of Howard community. These have included strengthening the school, creating safe spaces, enhancing neighborhood recreational facilities, and ensuring affordable neighborhood housing.

After reflecting on *Family Matters’* program goals, it was not surprising to recognize outcomes of its long-standing efforts, heard in the words of its teen girls. Apparently, a consensus has emerged across generations involved in this organization. The issues identified by GCLA are echoed in the concerns of its female youth. They seek to re-frame the public view of their community, East Rogers Park.

As an introduction for our students, we embedded this information about *Family Matters’* background in a contextual essay about the project and a brief history of the neighborhood. Next, we explored the topic of privilege and many ways it presents in society and within our own classrooms. We analyzed our multiple identities and myriad ways we all differ from ‘others’. We then read and discussed ways to overcome some barriers separating individuals. Finally, we considered methods of building bridges across those divides, seeking commonalities and merits of attempting such a challenge.

Our students eagerly engaged in the project and provided invaluable insights. As they worked in small groups to critique our interview protocol, they soon identified a bridge to the teen girls: they were only a few years older. Their suggestions about comfortable words and phrases allowed us to relate more easily to the teens. They read transcript excerpts and articulated emerging themes. In readings and discussions, they explored particular risks that the teens might be exposed to. Yet they became critical analysts in rejecting

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By the 1960s, half of the African-American population in Rogers Park and one-fourth of its Latinos lived in the North of Howard area. To aid poor families in this part of the neighborhood, community groups organized legal aid programs, food pantries, and English-language classes for Hispanic and Asian newcomers.

— (U.S. Census data, 1970)
generalized assumptions about the “victim” image that many readings infer as they portray low-income urban girls of color. They became advocates for these teens, wanting the best for them and wishing they could continue with us as the courses ended.

With all these young women’s perspectives in hand, we also sought out older adults that embodied strengths in their neighborhood: positive family role models, educators, community activists, and political and economic development leaders. We asked them to respond to the teens’ views and have excerpted many of their responses within the pages of this monograph. In this way, we began to provide the teens’ voices a wider hearing than they might have already had, allowing powerful adults in their lives access to views held by the community’s young constituents. They, in turn, spoke about what they saw unfolding around them and initiatives they were undertaking on behalf of the community. Some of their perspectives meshed with those of the teens, others stood in striking contrast.

As the school year ‘02-’03 wound down, we all began to think about the next stages of this project. We hired two of the Family Matters’ teens as interns in the DePaul University Women’s Studies Program to serve as research advisors on the project. They planned with us the project’s next phases: publication and presentation of the monograph. Each week, they read text excerpts and advised us as to whether the teens’ voices were ‘coming through’ accurately. They also met with DePaul University staff to choose layout, color and text designs and learned from a faculty member that specializes in dramaturgy simple ways to convert narratives into dramatic presentations. They attended “Women Alive! A Legacy of Social Justice”, an exhibit celebrating the lives of a small group of Chicago women leaders. They took rolls of photos, collected poetry by their peers and wrote some of their own. They toured DePaul’s Richardson Library archives and saw where their materials would be permanently stored (near materials related to Napoleon and Charles Dickens). They stood in the reception room where their upcoming monograph would be presented. In addition, some of the teens decided that they next wanted to learn about dramatizing narratives. Several signed up for a drama day camp program. We all planned that a future dramatic performance would be held in Winter and Spring, 2004. Families and friends of the teens, and members of the Rogers Park and DePaul University communities are to be invited to both events, when we hope to recruit interested individuals to work with us on the next suggested step: a life narrative project with the teens’ mothers.

We decided to expand the project as it progressed, to include recent alumnae of Family Matters that might be available and willing to participate. Their voices could give us all retrospective views of young women’s experiences and of the community as it was during their own adolescence. So they gathered a group, together for the first time since they graduated from high school, to reflect on these topics.

It is our hope that as readers continue through this monograph, they may be rewarded in an array of ways: that they might be concerned about the challenges facing these teen girls and their families, inspired by the energy and courage emanating from these young women, and, compelled by the activism embraced by individuals committed to enacting change, and prompted to ask what their own next steps might be.

**Feminist Underpinnings**

We have chosen the telling of the teens’ stories as the form of our research, a methodology that is grounded in feminist belief that life narratives are central to the existence of social life (Thompson, 2000). The details may be contradictory, Thompson maintains, but that does not make them right or wrong. The teens’ views and experiences are not put forth as being representative of a universal social life. Yet these narratives have real value to the tellers as well as their listeners. The narrative process involved the active participation of the teens as they constructed ways of describing and accounting for themselves to their listeners and readers.

This type of research, as Thompson holds, has the attraction of being both accessible and democratic. The individuals come alive through their words, providing insights and experiences that researcher Jean Barr
(1999) has labeled as coming “from below”. This data is valued not because it is assumed to be more accurate than that from other sources, but because it makes space for voices that are not usually listened to. Public dissemination of this research data increases the possibilities for creating knowledge that might be useful to those who generate it and those who are open to receive it, Barr maintains. What such research can provide is a richness and variety of detail about the ways and meanings through which gender, class, race and ethnicities are articulated and from which young teens construct their individual identities.

Life narratives have a significant place in feminist research. As social science researcher Annette Kuhn argues, “[T]elling stories about the past is a key moment in the making of ourselves”. And while the memories included in such stories are personal, Kuhn maintains, the connections they make transcend the individual teller. They weave a series of meanings, threading through the personal, cultural, economic, political, social and historical pieces of everyday living. These stories create a record of the lives of marginalized females, capturing their ways of knowing and seeing the world. According to Kuhn, these “are rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated...” (Kuhn, 1995).

Telling such stories has also been identified as a way of producing knowledge “from the inside” about gender, class and education, deriving from personal, particular and shared experience, in the search for greater, more nuanced understanding (Thompson, 2000). At the same time, creating life narratives can produce knowledge about “people in a state of dispossession [attempting to] gain their inheritance...” by altering the “constraints which the material, political and educational maldistribution of resources imposes” on these individuals. (Steedman, 1986). The teens searched for possibilities and opportunities, even as the distribution of such opportunities, according to Steedman, is currently controlled by class, race and gender interests that remain resistant to widespread social change.

Grounded in this feminist research approach, we have been committed to conducting research for and with these teen girls, as opposed to conducting research on them (Sollie, & Leslie, 1994). This type of project focuses on topics vital to the teens’ lives, giving voice to their experiences and providing possible directions toward community change. Yet, at the same time, we have been keenly aware of the importance of the relationship between ourselves and the young participants. Rather than exploit their stories based on power inherent in the position of university researchers, we sought to strike a balance among us; we recognized that the teens’ voices must be clearly communicated on the written page. We hoped this would ensure that the teens’ priorities stood out, rather than other priorities that we might have presumed were, or should be, those of adolescent females. Additionally, it was critical that the teens realized they were perceived by others as collaborators, rather than objects, in this research project.

As we faced these challenges, we also benefited from prior exploration of these issues by other feminist researchers. They also have struggled to find ways to interpret the voices of their interviewees. In such studies, it is the researcher who ultimately must provide some framework for understanding the views and stories of the participants. Final responsibility for analyzing their stories also must remain with the researcher. We addressed the question: How best to put this principle into action? Three guidelines emerged from our exploration of the literature: 1.) engage in ongoing collaboration with the interviewees as their stories and views are analyzed, (Gluck & Patai, 1991); 2.) continually reflect on our own position as it affects our understanding and the research process (Franz, & Stewart, 1994); and 3.) realize that no one source of knowledge provides a complete picture (Sollie, & Leslie, 1994).

Based on these guidelines, we decided on a pro-active role in framing the teens’ voices and views. This frame includes our own perspectives. We value: 1.) an “asset-based” model that emphasizes the girls’ strengths and resiliencies, rather than the more pervasive “deficit model” in which girls’ experiences are often viewed as deficient in comparison to their more “privileged” peers; 2.) a particular focus on these young females, realizing that what they say and what the research project produces does not in any way imply generalizable findings applicable to other groups of teens. The opportunity for these teens to give voice to
their views and for others to hear them is significant in and of itself. We also recognize that many young males in the east Rogers Park community also face many challenges and indeed, have their own perspectives on their experiences. However, the limitations of this project require us to focus only on the young female members of Family Matters. The exclusion of other individuals or groups does not in any way impute a lesser status in our regard; 3.) the exploration of the social, cultural and historical contexts that surround these teens’ experiences. We recognize the varied challenges facing the teens as they encounter personal examples of political and economic inequities and societal or cultural power imbalances. We hold that these issues can significantly impact the teens’ growth, even if they don’t yet understand or recognize such social forces, just as that growth is influenced by their own maturational development; 4.) the significance of emphasizing empowerment through active participation in learning from and educating others.

Initial Meeting

With these parameters established, we held our first meeting with the teen girls. Over pizza, salad and pop, sitting around a long, broad table at Family Matters, under the big board of seeing eyes and parted lips, we all began to learn more about each other. After introductions, Beth Carlett talked a bit about her ongoing research interests in families and personal relationships. Irene Beck described her upcoming course, “Growing Up Female in America”. We explained that the young women at the table, as members of Family Matters’ teen girls programs, were invited to join us in a project that would begin at the start of our approaching semester. We explained that we wanted to create an opportunity for them to think and talk about their own views of their changing community, providing a time when they could voice their concerns about the way the neighborhood has been portrayed to the general public. We said we also wanted to collaborate with them in possibly forming positive personal relationships and shaping new ways for them to contribute to their family life.

We then asked the teens to tell us who they are, how they wanted us to describe them to our students, and how they wanted to be portrayed in this writing. They immediately volunteered to take turns talking.

“Who We Are”

One young woman, a high school senior, spoke about her interests in writing poetry and listening to music. She then described her plans for the future that focused on college admission and final steps she needed in order to complete her admission applications. She took mental stock of herself: sentimental, moody and sensitive. She had been a member of Family Matters for five years and saw that it had been valuable to have a history there. “I like coming here and doing different things,” she said. “Besides, Family Matters has opened doors for me. I’ve learned how to define myself; found out about scholarship opportunities, and been involved in different community things. I like all that.” Others also pointed out that this young woman’s poems were also displayed on the meeting room walls.

Another teen, three days shy of her fourteenth birthday, said she liked to express herself through art. She considered herself both antsy and shy. A member of Family Matters since first grade, she said, “I want to state my opinions on things, and through art that’s mostly abstract, I can do that.” “I want someone to ‘tune me’, “ she continued, “to help me improve. And I like to help out with little children.” She was eager to explore her options for high school and chatted with us later about what it takes to apply for admission to Chicago magnet public schools that are highly competitive and academically challenging. Belonging to Family Matters, she said, has gotten her “used to taking on things.” “It’s also helped me with committing to things and finishing them,” she continued. “And it’s helped me with public speaking.”

Yet another young teen spoke about the jewelry business that the Sisters in Unity have worked on. Its Infinity Gallery, originated with the Sisters of Struggle about a decade earlier, has been housed at Family Matters. Designing and crafting their own beaded and silver pieces, teen girls over the years have marketed and displayed their jewelry at stores, fairs, and special events around the Chicagoland area. At their regular weekly meetings, they have created new products, kept sales records, paid taxes, and shared profits.

One young woman talked about the decisions she and other members struggled with, as they determined this year’s commitment: would they move away from creating these products? They considered other options. All this, she said, had given her a newer, stronger sense of trust within the group that felt very good. She also said she liked the times at Family Matters when she could do nothing, just sit around, listening to music.
Sometimes she could be with friends there, build relationships, or go on the computer.

Recently, a high school senior said, some of the older teens had shifted their creativity from creating jewelry to crafting scented, multi-colored, one-of-a-kind molded candles. “I like that we get to know each other better while we’re making these.” She spoke proudly about the leadership trip she and the other members of the Sisters of Struggle took to Wisconsin, where they challenged themselves and encouraged each other through a ropes course that broadened their own self-definition and deepened their sense of mutual trust. Through Family Matters, she was nominated for Camp Entrepreneur and received a $1,000 registration grant. For much of the 2001-2002 school year, she and other teens learned to write a grant proposal to host “Open Mike” events. They were awarded a $500 grant for that proposal and, last Spring, they hosted four such events that she described as a good self-definition project. In the summer of 2002, she reported that she had been a core member of the community activism video project.

A new, young member of Family Matters spoke about her love of writing, especially in her diary, which she defended as off-limits to all others, especially her sister. She also described herself as athletic, and as someone who loved to play lots of sports. Shifting topics, she also spoke openly of a death in her family, and how thankful she was for her mother, who, as she said, “birthed me.”

As still others talked, varied pictures of their families began to emerge: close bonds with their relatives, many being raised by single mothers and grandmothers, and with extended families including aunts, uncles, and cousins. For some, that meant living in the same apartment with all those relatives. Others, whose families stayed back in the Caribbean, struggled to maintain strong, long-distance ties as they started solo immigrant journeys.

While the rest of the group patiently listened, joked, encouraged, and supported each young woman’s story, a strong bond clearly tied those around the table: the connections they had created to East Rogers Park, Gale Academy elementary school, and most significantly, to Family Matters, drew them all close. The benefits of learning echoed around the room: voices spoke of opportunities to become a leader, run a business, develop public speaking skills, write a successful grant proposal, and become more aware of themselves, their talents, and potential.

Several teens spoke about complex, difficult projects that had challenged each member to commit or not. As one young teen noted, “Belonging here puts you to the test. If you’re not capable of something, you learn what you have to work on.” Another summed up, “All this teaches you respect: for yourself and for others.”

“What We Want To Say”

By the time the dessert brownies were gone, the teen girls had identified the things they wanted to talk about in their upcoming interviews. They readily volunteered topics such as, what it’s like as a female to grow up in their neighborhood. What it’s like to hear how other people see them and their community. What it’s like to be called a “Howard Street girl,” (“not good,” one commented). What choices they have to make every day; how to choose among those that are so opposite. What it must be like to be living on the street. They raised safety issues, violence, and fear of being killed. They wanted to talk about what they see in some adult women—females who don’t get along with other females, those who don’t work together to talk about issues they have with each other. “Females who just want to fight,” (“really bad,” someone noted).

Many topics about family and personal relationships were put on the table: decisions they have to make in dealing with others. Struggles between sisters at home, close and sometimes conflicted relationships with mothers, feeling the need to protect and look out for relatives, feeling sorry for the hurts other family members endure. How it feels to be a young female who is outspoken, especially when people don’t expect it or particularly like that. They wanted to talk about experiencing for the first time things like close relationships, sex and offers to do drugs.

The teens said they wanted other young teen females to hear their views on these issues. People who are going through the same thing, so they’ll know they’re not alone and maybe gain some new ideas,” one
elaborated. Adults too, needed to hear what they wanted to say, they agreed, “especially those who keep going on about ‘young teenagers’, but who don’t really want to get to know any of us.”

When the meeting wound down, the teens wanted to know what was coming next. Their priorities supplied the scaffolding of the interview questions we would ask; their preference for telephone and in-person interviews led us to these methods of data collection; their daily routines structured our taping schedules. Past the interviews, the teens would also have opportunities to review their written transcripts and work with us in designing the monograph. Additionally, many seemed really interested in our suggestion that they might submit poems, art work and photos for the project.

As the project unfolded, it exceeded our expectations, enriching us as professionals and as women. While we formed personal ties to the teen girls who are members of Family Matters, we both were delighted to draw on other parts of ourselves that rarely overlap with academia; our baking brownies and carting cans of soda pop set the stage for meetings with these young women that reminded us both of our own present and past experiences as parents and step-parents of teen girls. Indeed, we were aware that there were differences that might divide us: race, ethnicities, age, access to privilege, to name a few. Yet strong commonalities prevailed; we were all females, passionate about what we’ve seen and heard, eager to talk and listen, and open to trusting each other. We were all willing to commit to building and then walking across bridges across any divides so we could all work to articulate what had previously gone unheard.

We have constructed two guiding frameworks for this monograph: 1.) the reality of risks and resiliencies in the teen girls’ lives; and 2.) the complexities and contradictions in the teens’ narratives. Risks that emerge internally, from the developmental stage of adolescence and/or personality characteristics of the individual, often intermingle with those from external factors described above. However, our emphasis resides as well in an opposite direction, focusing on resiliencies that the teens have claimed as their own. These opposite factors are essential in understanding the ways in which these teens do or do not succeed in meeting countless challenges. At the same time, it is important that we not attempt to smooth over the complex and often contradictory statements made by the teens. To short-circuit these in a search for simplicity or clarity would breach the trust the teens have given to us—to present their voices and views, as they express them. Indeed, we believe that it is only in the telling and then reflecting on such complexities that we may arrive at a deeper understanding of the teens’ lives.

In studying the teens’ words, several prominent themes have emerged: their concern for street safety, the need for adequate prevention of bullying, harassing and assaults at school, their concerns about the shrinking pool of affordable housing units in their neighborhood, the complex relationships they encounter within the families and with peers, sources of support, and their hopes and plans for the future.
What does it mean to grow up female in East Rogers Park?

Simple as this question sounds, it is rich in its complexities. Our study focuses on girls in the coming-of-age-period of growing up—the teen years. For American youth, these years are typically roiled by turbulence, as teens search for their own identity, pull away from the familiar as they rush toward the unknown, and couple their newly bursting impulses with a sharpened critical eye toward what surrounds them. Adults familiar with adolescents can attest to the contradictions that pop out of their growing bodies and spirits: they crave independence at the same time that they form tight cliques or join gangs. They strut their newly minted physiques yet protest when people comment on them. They are drawn to taking radical risks before they can possibly understand the life-long ramifications attached to them. In general, adolescence is widely held to be that time in life when developmental challenges confront American youth: separating from their families and significant adults in their lives; coping with varying rates of maturation in physical, sexual, cognitive, emotional and social parts of themselves; experimenting with and taking sexual, physical and health risks; acquiring varying levels of competence and self-confidence; and forming a sense of identity.

Much of traditional research about adolescence has focused on teens in general, as though actual teens match an abstract composite that undergoes expected physical, psychological, social and cognitive changes, as a result of growing into a certain developmental age range. This image of an abstract adolescent typically emerges without context that comprise the complexity of real teens’ identities, such as their gender, race, ethnicity or dis/abilities. Yet more recent research in one of these areas has highlighted many unique differences in adolescents’ development related to their gender (American Association of University Women, 1993).

Research in the past fifteen years on gender has begun to shine light on a previously overlooked part of adolescent development. Young adolescent girls have become the subject of intensive investigations and detailed discussions, particularly concerning their psychological, social and educational development. Early research findings about young female teens indicated that their self-esteem, solid until pre-puberty, became vulnerable and tended toward sharp decline as
adolescence approached (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). In the face of sexist curricula and harassing school climates, researchers found that girls were silencing themselves. Educators grew alarmed at the withdrawal of young teen girls from competitive learning in math and science courses (American Association of University Women, 1992). All of these findings were unique to female adolescents. Their plummeting self-esteem trajectory, along with a disconnection from what has been called “their authentic selves”, (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hammer, 1990) and their diminishing participation in math and science courses as they got older, all differed from male adolescents’ experiences.

However, as studies have become more refined and data have been disaggregated according to races and ethnicities, deeper pockets of risk as well as resilience have been found in the fabric of young females’ experiences. For instance, many Latina girls have been found to be at greater risk of withdrawal from challenging academics, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school than their non-Latina peers. On the other hand, many African-American young teen girls have not silenced themselves, unlike their counterparts from other ethnicities and races. Indeed, by middle school, they often have developed into peer leaders (American Association of University Women, 2001). In multiple examples such as these, interrelating complexities of age, gender, races and ethnicities may be seen at work in shaping the inner terrain of female adolescents.

Still, the role of social class has been among the least examined parts of adolescent identity. Research on female adolescents often has centered on risks, focused on self-defeating or negative behaviors in their lives, particularly among low-income urban girls of color. These include topics such early sexual activity, teen pregnancies, unhealthy sexual practices, and involvement with violence, either as victims or perpetrators. Rarely has research centered on the resiliencies and positive trends in the experiences of these young women. Widely held assumptions link poor economic conditions to a multitude of deficits in the lives of girls and young women. Yet an interesting resilience has been found among low-income teen girls of color: they have been found to be far less vulnerable to the epidemic of eating disorders and distortions of body image that plague many white and some African-American middle- and high-income teen girls and young women. (American Association of University Women, 2001.) This raises a question of whether it may well be possible that there are still other resiliencies in these young women of color that have yet to be identified and documented by academic researchers. But, according to the National Council for Research on Women, “the voices of these girls are rarely heard in research reports or in discussions of policies that affect their lives.” (Phillips, 1998).

While there are many complex strands that weave into the fabric of a teen girl’s life, traditional research often has limited its focus to the individual and what is going on inside of her. The frame around the study of adolescent development has often been based on the individual. Still, recent research suggests that many of the difficulties that erupt during adolescence may emanate less from within, from innate tendencies or fixed personality characteristics, than from external social factors that might include poverty/wealth, family issues, and cultural and societal responses toward youth. A feminist research lens casts a wide gaze, drawing in such factors as families’ levels of income and financial stability, geographic location and the teens’ relationships to others. This research lens opens to a still wider scope as well, to include the interplay of larger societal and cultural interactions, clashes and oppressions.

Listening as these young teen girls have voiced their views along with their stories, we see that a significant part of what they know, and quite possibly of who they are, is shaped by what they are learning and experiencing in their community. Just as they want to believe they can be anything they set their minds and hearts to become, they are confronted by multiple complexities, mixed messages and shifting boundaries. The teens’ stories have told of the point in time when East Rogers Park has been undergoing major cultural, economic and political changes that have been shifting structures and literally re-creating landscapes.

As prior boundaries have blurred amid disappearing spaces, we have heard a strand of questions threading through the teen girls’ narratives: Where is fairness in the changes happening in their community? Who controls sidewalk safety? Why must most young women be publicly targeted by males on neighborhood streets? Who gets to have power and who doesn’t? And why is that?
Views of East Rogers Park: From the Inside and Out
Many perceptions that young people form about themselves and the world around them initially come from the outside. These external views that are expressed by others strongly shape a sense of self in youth, as they internalize such received knowledge. Teens are particularly sensitive to such information, while they try to define their own identity: how does where I live affect who I am and what others think about me?

As an initial matter in this chapter, we’ll review a few central elements from our feminist-informed theoretical framework. Our “asset-based” approach emphasized the girls’ strengths and resiliencies. However, these positive traits stood in the midst of external imbalances that often put the teen girls at risk for success: political and economic inequities, and cultural power imbalances surrounded them.

Listening as these young teen girls have voiced their views along with their stories, we saw that a significant part of what they knew, and quite possibly of who they were, was shaped by what they were learning and experiencing in their community. Just as they wanted to believe they could be anything they set their minds and hearts to become, they were confronted by multiple complexities, mixed messages and shifting boundaries.

In this chapter, the young teens spoke about themselves, their neighborhood, and how they thought others, not from the area, perceived East Rogers Park. They also expressed their own reactions to all of that, including complexities and contradictions. These reactions were mixed, as the following excerpts indicate:

It’s kind of crazy, because you know you live in this neighborhood and you want people to think good stuff about your community, where you live, and then you are actually part of it. I mostly stay inside my own neighborhood here in East Rogers Park. It’s very quiet and peaceful and you can walk down the block with your dog.

Some comments were generally positive:

Growing up in my neighborhood is very nice because we’ve got different cultures and no loud music. It’s peaceful. People don’t stay out on the streets.

They spoke proudly of the diversity that surrounded them. In their view, cultural and racial differences offered great opportunities:

Growing up in Rogers Park, I have friends and neighbors that are Hispanic, Blacks, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Indians and people from Japan.

My friends are Mexican, Belizian, and Caucasian and black.

Almost all my friends are African-American, like me. I have one white friend, a guy friend. And I have Mexican friends. I’m a kind of person that wants to be friends with a lot of people.

Interestingly, when asked specifically if racism had affected their lives, almost all of the girls responded, “No”. At the same time, however, they recounted several instances that involved stereotyping:

There’s a lot of diversity here and I’m cool with it. I get along with everybody. I’m African-American, but I guess the way I talk and because I sound intelligent, I’m known to be a white girl, surprisingly. I have an equal amount of blacks,
Hispanics and white people for friends. But my friends think I have a bigger ratio of white people that are my friends, because I’m smart.

When I see some people that aren’t from around this neighborhood walk to this place, they look at us then they start walking so fast, even though you’re not in a situation where you’re fighting, they’re afraid of you.

Indeed, the teens did not identify any racism connected with larger societal or cultural issues, such as economic disparities or in particular, those related to affordable housing issues that they later described as very troubling. Only one teen related an incident, apparently race-related, that happened far away from East Rogers Park. It is possible that both the previous and following excerpts may indicate that the teens thought of racism as limited to personal attacks:

When we went to (a town in downstate) Illinois last summer, we were going to visit my sister’s friend. He’s African-American and his father was Caucasian. While we were there, they left but they let us stay at the house. His friends came by and they were Caucasian also. They saw us in the house and they tried to call to the police—the police station was across the street. I was upset that they did that. Because we were African-Americans, they didn’t think we could be their friends.

Beyond thinking about the impact of racism and racial stereotypes, the teens talked about more general impressions of their neighborhood. Their narratives were often layered with ambivalence, complexities and contradictions:

In my neighborhood, sometimes it could be a very nice day and everyone is saying, “Hi,” and stuff like that. You can just walk past without anyone saying anything. But on other days, people will say something mean to you while you’re walking and stuff like that, and that would be a bad day. I like my neighborhood because I grew up here all of my life, but I think it could be better.

Several indicated that they felt good about their own block and a few nearby streets. Yet they raised cautions about other areas:

I would describe my neighborhood in a lot of different ways. It’s okay for me and is a place that I can count on because it has a lot of people I know around me. Some other streets, there’s danger. So I actually stay in my close neighborhood.

I hope when I grow up, someday I’ll have a nice house and a nice family, not around this chaos.

When the teens talked about how they thought others outside East Rogers Park viewed their community, they sounded both satisfied and concerned at the same time:
Most people say good things about the neighborhood, so it’s okay. But if somebody says bad things, I object to it. People say Rogers Park is safe, that it’s a nice community, nice people. I agree—I think it is pretty safe and it has nice parks and nice people. But if someone says Rogers Park is the best place to live, I wouldn’t agree that much. It has a lot of affordable housing, but most of it might be turned into condos. Friends I know had to move because they were in apartments that went condo. Some went to the south side or the west side. They were sad and so was I. Some streets are changing, not others.

At other times, a defensive tone crept in:

My friend used to go to grammar school in Evanston and she was talking to a friend there and she said, “Come with me to my house.” And the friend was like, “No, I don’t want to go on that side. It’s the jungle.” They call it the jungle. I don’t think that’s fair because there’s worse places than here. Like where my grandma used to live in the west side of Chicago. That’s worse out there than here.

Some people outside our neighborhood call this the jungle. “It smells over there,” they say. “I don’t go up in there. It’s the jungle.”

I was like, “My neighborhood isn’t that bad.” It’s like just a lot of families. It might not be a nice place like Evanston, but it is nice and it is a lot of fun. And Evanston is worse because I know a lot of people that have had their bikes stolen over there. And some kids get treated bad over there when they go trick or treating.

The teens often spoke in detail about “unwritten rules” on their neighborhood streets:

Some people pick on Howard Street. They have a thing about territories. They won’t say it, but if they’re on this corner and you’re on that corner, and you walk on their side, they’ll stop you because everyone on Howard knows everybody from around there. So, if the Howard people walk on Thorndale, two people will get into it and have a fight until someone’s head gets busted.

Yet they were quick to point out that these patterns were not gang-related:

This isn’t gang stuff. We’re just talking about a group of guys that hang around and do whatever...They consider themselves to be part of the street. But most of the time, it has nothing to do with drugs. “It’s just me and my friends hanging around here. If I don’t know you and you come over here, I have a problem with it.” I think it’s because they’re feeling threatened or disrespected.

The teens reacted to the varied views others held about their neighborhood. As they spoke, the complexities...
in their views came to the foreground:

I think that people think there’s a lot of gang banging in our neighborhood and that there are a lot of not so intelligent people. It has a lot to do with misunderstanding because, just like any other community, or any other cultures, you can never understand what goes on, unless you’re living it. It’s literally the only way: you have to be in that situation to understand everything that’s going on. And for a person who hasn’t done that, it’s stereotyping, basically. You don’t know what goes on, so to judge us and say that it’s only this way, that’s not right.

Some emphasized commonalities they saw in their neighborhood that could be found anywhere:

I think my neighborhood is just like any other neighborhood. All neighborhoods have problems. All neighborhoods take a while to take steps to solving those problems. All neighborhoods have people living in them that cause problems. But it’s all similar, if you really think about it. There’s no perfect neighborhood. There are no perfect people. A neighborhood is just the best of what you make it.

Resiliencies resonated throughout the teens’ narratives; their adaptive capacities to translate risk into opportunity came through clearly:

Even though our neighborhood has situations in which groups are involved, our strengths have to do with supporting each other. Even though we may start situations with other people, both groups are very close. Like there are a lot more kids in the neighborhood than adults. And sometimes the kids go against each other. But even within our competing, there’s a lot of love. Most of the people in our neighborhood know there are some others that don’t work hard. But most work hard to prove that they can, they are intelligent and I think we should focus on them.

The teens frequently reflected on their own ways of coping with negatives in the neighborhood:

If I’m around here and I see somebody I don’t know, I do get suspicious. I’m not dissin’ them, but I get suspicious because I don’t know what type of power they have or are looking for.

If I had a chance to move from my neighborhood, I would, but I would make sure my old neighborhood is safe. I would come back and visit. Check up, you know.

I’d like to see less drug activity, for them to clean up the park, fix it up. I want to stay here.
Many turned these obstacles into challenges for themselves:

I think that makes me work even harder, knowing that my community has a certain reputation. I do it for myself, but I also do it so that people know those of us coming out of this community are not bad. This community's reputation as bad has to do with some people in it, not the whole community itself. People make up the community. I think I'm very intelligent and I have wanted to speak up and say, “I think because I'm an African-American female that lives in this community that gives me an even bigger boost to being successful.”

I would stay in my neighborhood, even if I had a chance to move away. It helps me keep open-minded. If I were to move where everything would just be extra-easy, I'd see how I'd become a spoiled brat. Being in this neighborhood and seeing how people not from this community see it, that keeps me on my toes.

I think of my home as being my community, even though I'm around my school community like 24/7. But I make mention of things that concern me and I let people know what I think about certain situations. I don't think I'll ever come up to get the guts to actually go and do something about it. I mean, people know me to be a person that speaks what I feel is right, and usually, what I feel or speak sounds reasonable.

Remarkably, several young teens have already participated in public advocacy for community change:

I went to a couple of gatherings with the Governor, around our neighborhood. One was in our school park across the street. I spoke at the beginning of that event. I've done three or four different public speaking's. I thought it was cool being able to have my voice, hear my people who are going to be the ones that we look up to.

It's not big—speaking and speaking my mind. It was just all tied into the time of my life when people knew me to be this type of person, so they would always come and ask me for things. I was getting hassled about getting bombarded with extra duties and stuff to pursue. I was getting a little frustrated with it. I've gotten over that because now I think of it this way: whatever I'm doing is going to pay off. And at 14, I can budget things so well because I've been bombarded with such things since I was like ten. I loved the opportunities to get me to go and speak what I have to say. It introduced me to a lot of new things. Now I know I'm able to do things like that and know that I'm able to live up to certain expectations.
Street Safety
Issues related to street safety were the clearest negative indicators about East Rogers Park, in the teen girls’ views. Street safety also was what concerned them most. It is in reading this section, after the more general view of the neighborhood previously described, that the teens’ mixed feelings about their neighborhood come into stark focus. In the preceding section, the teen girls largely defended their community against negative perspectives from outsiders. Yet, in the following pages, they chronicled their very realistic fears about dangers that would be disturbing to people anywhere.

The first segment of this section focuses on the societal and personal risks to which the teens are exposed. The particular issues related to street safety cluster around physical violence, gendered aggression perpetrated by men and by adolescent males, as well as discomfort with unpredictable behaviors demonstrated by homeless and mentally ill individuals in public situations. Throughout the teens’ narratives, they cited countless examples of behaviors that threatened street safety in their neighborhood. It is startling to realize that the threat of physical violence was ever-present for the teen girls.

**Physical Violence**

Social science research has documented the long tradition of caring, compassion and interdependence in the African-American community (Ward, 1995). Later in this chapter, the teen girls spoke of their protective families, neighbors and friends, who were strong role models of just this caring and interdependence. These, over time, have served most communities well by mitigating interpersonal violence. However, these studies have also indicated that increased violence may reveal a breakdown in that communal caring, which then exposes local youth to conflicting messages about relating with others. Adolescents in these circumstances are faced with risks. A thirteen- year old reported:

> I like my neighborhood and my friends but it can get kind of crazy because a lot of people get killed around here sometimes. But when I was a child, it wasn’t really like this. It was just, you know, playing in the park. But now it’s different. Since I got older, I see people getting killed going to different places on Howard. It’s just crazy.

Some identified violence as the primary community problem:

> What’s good about it is that I know everybody here. Most of the people here, I grew up with. What I’d like to see changed is to have not a lot of lives getting lost. Like the two people whose lives got lost in Rogers Park last summer—one was my friend’s cousin and one was my brother’s friend.

> Just about every other day, friends are fighting each other, yelling or physically fighting. Even with hammers.

> If I could, I would probably move out of Rogers Park because it’s kind of bad and it’s not quiet. You hear guns shooting at night. I’m thinking I’d like to move to Michigan where my cousins live. It’s quieter there.

In addition to the teen girls’ narratives, we had also interviewed adult alumnae of *Family Matters*, all young women of color, ranging in age from 20 to 23. We asked them to reflect on how they remembered East Rogers Park while they were growing up, about five to seven years earlier. We also asked them to compare their views of the neighborhood today with what the teen girls reported. Their comments were compelling:

> The park used to be so bad when I was growing up there, I was not allowed to go to the park. There was shooting going on there. When I was in the after-school program at *Family Matters*, all the parents had a problem with the kids going to
the park on the corner. So that’s when we started going further away to other parks.

Drugs are less now than they used to be. So is the violence. I remember a time when I was about nine or ten, I was caught in a cross fire, a shoot out. I almost got shot. And now there are next to no gangs there. They still deal drugs, but it’s on the hush-hush.

Drug dealing is on the side streets. It’s not on Howard anymore. Three years ago, it was on Howard. It didn’t matter how cold it was. It was on Howard. As soon as they put the new park up, the drugs were over.

I was like eight or nine when I came to this neighborhood. It didn’t really bother me that much. I knew it’s not a safe neighborhood, but it’s nothing I felt like I needed to worry about. As I got older, then I learned more about, “Oh, you’ve got to be careful. People are doing this at this corner.”

The violence, I didn’t understand. My reaction was, “I don’t like it. I don’t like it.” But you get used to it.

There might be a gunfight now and then, but it won’t be as much as it was back then. But there’s still going to be that violence there. That’s not going anywhere.

This natural tendency of young people to adapt to the situation in which they find themselves raised concerns in our minds. We wondered about the challenges the teens faced to recognize danger on their streets but then to integrate it into the fabric of their lives. A major risk they faced was the “normalizing” of aggressive behavior on the part of many adults. How would the teen girls accommodate those experiences, yet still feel proud of their community and safe in their homes?

**Gendered Aggression**

“When men don’t speak up or take action in the face of other men’s abusive behavior toward women, that constitutes implicit consent of such behavior. Many men have been socialized to be passive bystanders in the face of sexist abuse and violence.” (Katz, 1995).

Along Howard Street, a main thoroughfare of East Rogers Park, many men of color have stood for hours, clustered by age: some older, some younger. They and their counterparts in cars cruising around the streets have left an intimidating presence in the minds of the teen girls. For adolescent females growing up in this environment, gendered aggression, displayed in verbal and nonverbal interactions and behaviors, becomes an early step in this dance with danger, as they begin to decide who they are, and how they are perceived, as emerging women. The pride and joy that developmentally come with their sexually changing bodies is too often tainted with fear and resentment that puberty has put them in the path of public humiliation and intimidation.

Indeed, many of the teens reported stark differences between what males and females face on the street:

You just see men get into fights with each other. But women, people try to talk to them. They think women are not anything.
Men will walk up to them and say, “Hi,” and just start trying to make conversation. And when they’re talking and stuff like that, and you just keep walking, they’ll curse at you. And they wouldn’t do that with a man.

In my neighborhood, the men feel they can just yell things at you. Walking past, right there on Howard, me and the other girls try to dodge them and get away from them because a lot of them will grab your arm, or they’ll grab your coat.

These socially constructed differences in their neighborhood presented risks to the teen girls’ positive sense of themselves, as they approached their own impending womanhood:

It’s kind of hard at times, because you feel rejected from all kinds of negativity when you walk down the street.

The older guys, they try to talk to you. The other day, there was this guy and I was wanting to know where my sister was. Then I saw her and she had to curse the guy out because he told me that I was getting too old to not talk to him. And then my sister and her friend said if he keeps bothering me, just tell them and they’ll talk to him and tell him to leave me alone. He’s a drug dealer, but he’s a kid.

The threats from men on the street sometimes went beyond talk:

This day we went to the library, me and a couple of my friends and this guy was walking by and my friend was ahead of me. So he just said to her, “Hi, how you doin’?” trying to hustle her. So I walk up behind her and he grabs my arm and he’s like, “I’m R. Kelly. Come here.” I’m just like, “Oh.”

I guess he did that probably because he’s older and he’s just interested or something. But he walked away, he just like grabbed my arm the moment he was passing, and then just walked on. Then he was just shouting down the street. I didn’t really hear him but it was something really ignorant. So I didn’t care.

I was calm, not really scared. I was like antsy because I didn’t know he was going to grab my arm. It usually scares me if I think it’s something harmful to me. But he was just walking down the street, (like he was) minding his own business.

Many instances of gendered aggression that the teen girls identified could be defined as sexual harassment. Nan Stein (1995), who has done groundbreaking national research on sexual harassment among teens, found that teen girls recognized incidents of sexual harassment and expected adults to view these aggressive violations as they did. Yet many girls could not get confirmation of their experiences because most adults did not name these instances as gendered aggression or sexual harassment and did nothing to stop them.

Stein maintains that in these situations, girls are taught that others around them will not help. They are faced with either accepting the harassment or retaliating in kind. Boys, on the other hand, receive permission
and even training in gendered aggression, since many of their public assaults on girls are not interrupted or censored by adults in the community. This pattern affects more than the offender and the targeted female; bystanders frequently receive the chilling message that they may be the next to be targeted, while no one does anything to prevent it. In such contexts, Stein maintains, such gendered aggression eventually becomes part of the social norm.

Even pre-teens sensed that they would be targeted by males that felt free to publicly call attention to their changing bodies. A twelve-year old reported:

It’s a challenge for me now in the hot weather. I want to wear shorts and a tank top and people whistle at me that I don’t even know. You might not like it and yet if you say something like, “Don’t look at me,” or something like that, they will say, “Well, don’t wear stuff like that.”

In the above situation, the targeted pre-teen was blamed by the offender for “making” men behave in offensive ways. She tried to regain her self-composure and wounded self-confidence:

That’s kind of wrong because you have the right to wear anything you want and those are people that should be able to control themselves and not direct those kinds of words at you. They don’t have a right to offend you or threaten you or tell you stuff that makes you feel scared. These are people off the street, hanging out. They do it to people just walking by. They mean it like in an innocent and playful way, but it can really hurt someone.

It is striking to note that this pre-teen, like the other young women, did not typically identify the adult offenders as “men”. Instead, they called them “people”, although when asked to clarify, they identified them all as male. This may reflect the reality that the teens have not yet examined their experiences along gendered lines. It is also disturbing to note that the young females saw the offenders as intending to be innocent and playful. This perception clashed with their own mixed reactions and inner fears:

Sometimes I just listen and I let it go. Other times I try to come up to talk to them, like, “Get away from me,” and I walk away. Basically, it’s like self-defense, which I can do, but I haven’t had to use it yet.

As the young teens approached womanhood, they often dreaded experiencing first-hand the menacing ways men treat women on the street:

I’m concerned about safety at night on Howard Street, the drug dealers and people like that. It’s different for women because women seem weaker, so people will probably mess with them more, just talk to them and get in their face. The women walk away or tell them to leave them alone.

Although they recognized how older women handled verbal offenses, they often questioned their own reactions and seemed uncertain about handling frequently occurring situations:

Guys try to talk to you, when they’ll pull up in a car and try to say something when you be walking down the street. It’s really busy, and you have the crosswalk. They’re in the car, sitting, waiting to go, they can stare at you and make a little comment. You know they’re going to try to talk to you.
The teen girls seemed to understand that at any time, the whistles, stares and comments could unpredictably turn more dangerous:

People are on the street and just sort of hassle us as we’re walking by. It goes on all the time. One time, we were out and my friend had to be at home. But she forgot something at another friend’s house. I told her to walk ahead and I’d catch up. All of a sudden, I saw her buzzing all the doorbells at the building. I asked her what’s wrong. She said, “A black car just pulled up real slow next to me and the guys inside were just staring in my face. They were wearing all black. So I ran back to the building and started ringing all the doorbells, so someone would let me in.”

Unwanted, negative attention from men on the street turned into stalking on at least several occasions:

Then, another time not long after, I saw the car again. We were leaving from my house to come to Family Matters. The car went through the alley and we said to each other, “This is the second time we’re seeing that car. Maybe it’s just a coincidence.” As soon as we come to the next corner, the car comes up and the driver says, “Hi, how you guys doin’?” We just walked off. We were gone.

My friend said, “I feel like that’s my stalker. Every time I see him, he’s either riding in a car or keeps circling the block.” Ever since then, we’ve just been looking at him like he’s crazy. We be looking and he just be staring.

The friend continued, recounting the next incident:

I walk home from school by myself because I’m big and rugged. I’m thinking, “That guy’s gonna be around. One day, I walk home and he’s standing right in front of my gate looking at me, staring. So I circle the block a couple of times and then he’s gone. This kind of thing happens during the day, mostly in the summer.

As these young women walked through Rogers Park, they have been confronted by men that challenge their right to use public spaces by yelling what they interpreted as insults:

Street hassles are not just on Howard St. I live near Touhy and I was walking with two friends from Howard who came to visit me. This guy yells out from a building, “You Howard chicks, get out of my neighborhood.” I said, “I live right here.” He says something back about knowing I don’t live right here because he’s seen me on Howard (which is near Family Matters). Then I say, “Because you see me on Howard, you assume that I live on Howard. And so, if I come in Touhy’s area, you think I’m disrespecting you.” That was so bad. Being called “Howard chick”.

For adolescent females growing up in this environment, this becomes an early step in a dance with danger, as they begin to decide who they are, and how they are perceived, as emerging women. The pride and joy that developmentally come with their sexually changing bodies is too often tainted with fear and resentment that puberty has put them in the path of public humiliation and intimidation.
Peer Gendered Aggression
According to recent research, when adolescent males of color lose community ties, they are often viewed by the larger society as social outsiders. Some authority figures view anti-social behaviors of low-income minority youth as evidence of personal deficits, and see them as resistant to help. (Gibbs, 1989). However, others in the social sciences have pointed out that low-income Black males, denied opportunity to equal access, may opt for one of two stereotypic male roles: “tough guy” or “player-of-women” (Oliver, 1989). While providing the illusion of control, both of these roles have been described as dysfunctional adaptations to racial and economic oppression. The “tough guy” may resort to violence in an effort to exert his dominance and control over others. For the “player-of-women,” competition with male rivals may lead to physical confrontations, and jealousy and distrust of women may result in violent acts against the women themselves.

As for the teen girls’ perspectives, we noticed a slight but significant shift in the tone of all their narratives when they talked about “guys” or “boys”. They often referred to males closer to their own age by their gender, as opposed to “people” that they often referred to, when they were talking about older men. This tone seemed to signal less vulnerability. This may be related to a greater sense of control or security they felt they had in situations when dealing with their peers. However, this could easily lead to a false sense of control over male behavior. At the same time, this perception could also condition adolescent females to accept gendered aggression as normal in everyday peer relationships:

Guys just hanging on the street don’t frighten me but I worry sometimes. I’m not totally scared about them, but I think, “What are they gonna do?” Usually a group of guys, trying to get props from their guys by hitting on girls, verbally abuse girls if they turn the guys down.

Although the teen girls were struggling to “normalize” their male peers’ behavior, trying to predict the unpredictable in attempts to feel a sense of control, the Family Matters alumnae were outspoken in identifying the teen male behavior on the street as offensive:

Another thing that’s changed is that a lot of the kids are growing up much faster. I was walking around the old neighborhood recently and these boys just came up around me, just cursing at me. Some kids used to do that, but it’s more open now. They were all around me, hassling me. It didn’t used to be like that.

The teen girls seemed sympathetic to the boys’ situations and often acknowledged that the boys had a harder social role to play than they had:

Girls have to deal with the guys trying to keep up their pride with their guys. But I think that’s equal to the same things guys go through. Guys have a lot more issues about getting initiated into gangs. And smart guys are known; they have it really hard because they’re intelligent. A lot of the other guys think being smart does not fit into the whole “I’m a thug” act.
Unpredictable Public Behavior: Homeless and Mentally Ill Men

In recent years, African-Americans, particularly low-income and working-class blacks, have sustained social as well as economic losses. According to Ward (1995), these factors are the pervasive effect of systemic racial and economic oppression. The historically strong structure of interdependence in communities of color has been supplanted by a relationship of dependence on a social service system that, for several generations, has been run from outside the local community and has fostered a sense of subservience and powerlessness in its recipients. As the historically traditional self-help community supports have diminished, there has been a parallel shift toward dependence on others. These outside-the-community sources have proven inadequate, and have often created additional social problems.

A recognition of this type of social problem was embedded in the teen girls' narratives about homeless and mentally ill men in public spaces. Once again, they typically referred to these individuals in gender-neutral terms: “people”, rather than “men”, which they later specified was the case. Beyond their own safety, the teens also seemed uncertain about their own responses:

At night there are poor people walking around and talking through alleys and singing to themselves and you don’t know who they are talking to.

When the police did intervene on a train, the teen perceived that the police arrested him for being poor, which she judged to be classism. This view differed from the police officer’s explanation of the crime—the man was trying to scam people for money:

Some people on the street are homeless. I don’t feel safe around them sometimes. They ask for money. I remember one person, they took him to jail because he was saying he was poor. He got on the train and asked my mom for some money. She gave him a dollar. We got off at the same stop with him and the police arrested him. They said he wasn’t poor.

The teens were distressed by what they saw and were conflicted: they wanted to help those less fortunate. On the other hand, they did not want to be taken advantage of:

I was going to the store and somebody else at the store asked, “Can I have a quarter? I don’t have any money.” I didn’t talk to him. When I went inside, I watched him buying everything he saw. That’s not right. He was asking me for money to buy him a sandwich, could I please put up some money for him, and he had like a hundred dollars! We see some poor people selling stuff and trying to get some money just to buy other things, so they can sell more stuff.

Although the teen girls were often reluctant to share their limited finances with those who asked on the street, they also frequently feared consequences if they did not offer money:

I saw another dude with a jacket on that had dog poop on the back. He was coming up to people on the train, asking for money. The car started to empty out and he scared the rest of us sitting there.

Some people keep asking. This one guy asked me, “Can I have some money?” I said, “No, I don’t have any.” I walked home and he came up by my house, and asked me again. I told him the same thing. I came back outside in a little while, and he was right there, asking the same thing. Same person, stalking me for some money.
We recognized these situations and reactions as those that many individuals are exposed to in public spaces. We also realized that the teens were voicing similar concerns and uncertainties that many others have felt in countless confrontations. We wondered where the police, those charged with protecting the streets, were in this picture.

A 17-year old teen spoke about her view of the police:

The teen girls spoke of their protective families, neighbors and friends, who were strong role models of caring and interdependence. However, increased violence may reveal a breakdown in that communal caring, which then exposes local youth to conflicting messages about relating with others.

I feel unsafe in the neighborhood. It’s sort of like the feeling that if the police aren’t here to protect me, am I ever going to feel safe? There’s racism here. Like police officers that work here probably arrest more black people than white people.

The young adult alumnae from Family Matters had strong, negative memories of the police in East Rogers Park three to five years earlier:

There’s this one cop, “Batman”, that just used to follow us around, but he would cause more trouble than he would help. Police back then used to help the neighborhood stay with their problems. You would see them riding past the same block. You’d see all these drug activities but there never seemed to be anybody they could arrest. Then they’d harass somebody for going into the liquor store to buy some soda pop. But then “Batman” got beat up. He disappeared for awhile. He’s back now. He’s still out there doing the same thing. We were up there the other day at the currency exchange and he came out and he was like, “Oh, how’re you doing?”

The police harassed my brother all the time. He just looked like a suspect to them because he’s Black. We had our own backyard and he was inside the gate and he was still getting harassed by the police. It’s all out there, who has to hustle. The majority of those who have to hustle to get by are African American. Some guys feel lazy and they don’t want to work. They want to find the easy way to get money, and that is to sell drugs. I guess the cops think, you’re a black guy. You must be out here selling drugs. That’s the only thing that I can see. But I haven’t seen a lot of that anymore.

Other alumnae described their views of the present police presence in the neighborhood:

They pick on the easy one to walk up on. They don’t pick on the real criminal that’s selling the rocks because they’re too scared of what he might pull out. But they’ll pick the real nice one that’s coming from somewhere, who just stops and says, “Hi”, to one person. Then (makes a siren sound) you see all these lights and you think, “Why don’t you get the other one?” They pick the little easy one, the one that you know isn’t doing the real crime.

The alumnae identified a strong gender difference in the attitude of the police that favored females. Although they benefited from what they saw as gender bias, they felt the treatment toward black males was unfair:
With cops, it’s always been easier for women. It’s harder for the guys. The cops are thinking that the guys are thugs. For the women, they think she’s probably got two kids at home and she can’t go anywhere. I saw one girl get arrested because she was trying to spray paint a mailbox. That was the only time a female got pulled over, when she was out there, doing something stupid. Past that, if you’re female, you can be the biggest one on the block with the most drugs, if you look nice. Put the bag inside your backpack, and you’re all good.

Estranged from images of the police as protectors of neighborhood youth and the embodiment of judicious law enforcement, the teens and their families have sought to create their own safety nets. At the same time that images existed of menacing men publicly intimidating others in the absence of police intervention, there was a contrasting view of the neighborhood as well. East Rogers Park also has been home to a largely diverse population, with African-American, Belizian, Latino/a families, along with whites of varied ethnicities. Many of the values that traditionally have gone hand-in-hand with these sub-cultures remain intact—close familial support for children, and values of caring and compassion clearly conveyed to youth, and interdependence encouraged.

Indeed, researchers have demonstrated that, during adolescence, the need to identify strongly with a sense of peoplehood is heightened for African-Americans by a consciousness of belonging to an ethnically and culturally distinct group that has a shared experience of racial discrimination and social oppression (Ward, 1990). To have such a collective identity is to know that one is not alone, that one is inextricably connected to others and embedded in a network of interdependent relationships within the African-American community. This source of resilience is further extended as adolescents integrate it within their experiences. According to Cross (1991), the development of a positive Black identity involves synthesis of internal and external experiences within the context of cultural, familial, societal, and historical influences. Other research concurs that healthy and successful identity development for Black youth is largely about moving beyond internalization of racial denigration to internalization of racial pride—that is, repudiation of unacceptable roles and a rebirth, or affirmation, of the self in one’s own terms (Ward, 1990).

Drawing on such strengths, the teen girls’ narratives have often focused on their attempts to reclaim personal power:

I live in walking distance of the school, but it really changes in those couple of blocks. Around my house, it’s really cool. People are all nice. Anywhere I go, people know me because I’m an easy person to get to know. People know that I have a good head on my shoulders. My safety comes first. I’ll be there to help you but you have to also respect me.

I go around the neighborhood differently now. I have a friend that lives across the street from Family Matters. And every time I go home, her mom says, “Make sure you call me so that I can make sure you got in the house.”

I had an older brother that used to live around here and the guys knew him and so since he was friends with everybody around, when people walk up to me, I don’t worry. I will say “Hi,” anyway, because I know they’re my brother’s friends. A lot of people will be waving at me. They knew my older brother and they know my mom.
Some teens have used external cues and internalized cautions:

I just don’t go out at night. I feel comfortable during the day.

Sometimes I get afraid in my neighborhood, when bad things happen. I was in the park one afternoon and a woman was fighting with a man and he stuck up a gun. All the kids went home and I did, too.

I think if they stopped people from buying guns, that could make things safer.

Some teens have relied on what they’ve learned:

I usually stay in the few blocks around my house, but I never go into the graveyard. It’s bad for you and if you mess with people’s graves, you’ll have bad dreams. Some people climb over the gates when they’re locked and play hide and go seek in there, and then climb back out.

Others have developed complex rationales:

I think that any situation is caused by some things that have happened to a person in the past. Or someone might come up with fighting say, because it’s the only route she can take, instead of trying to work it out or come up with other solutions.

Guys talk to you and they might at times nag at you, because they know you’re the type of person you are and what you go for and what you don’t, guy-wise. So they don’t bother you. They know you’re nice. But guys know better than to mess with me because I’m not afraid. Otherwise, they’ll try to come up to you with simple lines—asking you, “What’s your name?” “How old are you?” “I’m trying to talk to you here.” If the guy’s a potential rapist, he’ll get the weakest girl in the group. If he sees all the other girls laughing and playing and you’re just sitting there quietly with your head down, he will pick you.

I’m afraid of drug dealers that stand out in front of a restaurant and they’re drunk. You just don’t know what they’re going to do. I took a self-defense class at Family Matters yesterday and it was great. I feel like I can defend myself now.

An alumna summed up her own strategy, drawing on her own awareness, "street smarts", and self-defense training:

Streets are never safe, if you’re stupid. That’s how I figure it. If you just walk around and you see all these people on the corner, and you don’t ever think, I might cross the street, that’s stupid. That’s still the same. I’m older now, and so you’re really aware of what’s going on. You know where to go and not to go. If you hear someone behind you and they’re going a little bit faster, you better run and you don’t look back.
MY WORLD

My world has no violence.
In my world everyone feels accepted.
No one is homeless or out of work.
Young people don’t get picked on or ignored.
Young people can express their feelings or ideas about the President if they don’t like him.
Or be a Buddhist and not be forced to go to a Christian camp by their parents.
And kids aren’t forced to hide who they’re dating (if they are dating someone).
Young people will be able to work if they want to.
Young girls will be able to walk down the street at night without being scared.
Young people would never even think about suicide.
In my world no one talks about anybody.
In my world there are very loving people.
People walk around hugging people they don’t know.
There are no magazines that say young women are supposed to look a certain way.
Young people are inspired to be all that they can be.
Affordable Housing
The teen girls are growing up in a neighborhood that is rapidly and radically changing. They are in the midst of a cultural shift larger than themselves and their own personal experiences. East Rogers Park is a community in transition. Its colorful history has shaped it into an ever-evolving diverse flow of ethnicities and races; the present shift relates to socio-economic classes. The last-to-be-annexed piece of Rogers Park, the area once called a “jungle”, where most of the people of color in the community have found low-income housing, has recently been “discovered” by real estate developers. Its appeal has been irresistible: close to the lake with direct public transportation to downtown Chicago, with a diverse population living in older brick apartment buildings, many in need of repair.

What is different about this wave of change from those in the past is that the proportion of renters to owners is dramatically declining. In the past, Rogers Park uniquely has mirrored the larger ethnic, racial and economic mix of the entire city of Chicago, while it maintained housing that was predominantly rental units. Now, many of these rental units are being converted into condominiums. This “gentrification” is ushering in a new financial stream, as upper-middle class, predominantly white people purchase rehabbed housing. Such a phenomenon is often viewed by outsiders as “good for the neighborhood”, with its attendant influx of commercial properties, rising property values and promise of lower turnover in population.

These changes were particularly striking to the alumnae, who, in many cases, left Rogers Park and have come back recently to visit:

Foot Locker, Subway, Quizno’s and a couple of others of those little stores. You can see them building now. It’s just like a complex. Two years ago, you just saw naked stores, or just space.

And the thing that’s just blowing me away is the high rises they’ve got. It’s like where did this come from? I was in Mississippi, and when I came back, it was up and people were living in there.

They’re putting in a Bally’s. Who’s going to Bally’s? Probably the people that are moving in to the high rises.

Compared to when I was growing up, it’s expensive. They’re changing everything from the stores to the buildings. Turning them into condominiums. Every other block is like that. So it’s tough to live there. More stores are coming up, like Dominick’s and Marshall’s. There were no stores like that before, until about a year ago.

From the teen girls’ perspectives, their families are on the downside of this change, struggling to achieve a small piece of control over their lives, as a consequence of these large shifts. The teens’ observations allowed for differing perspectives about what really is good for the neighborhood and for whom:

Dominick’s supermarket—I know that they didn’t build it for us. It’s disappointing. It’s positive for the neighborhood, but I have the sense it’s not really for my community.

The teens implicitly recognized the irony of “community improvement”:

They made an offer that if you lived in a building that they’re going to make into a condo, you could have a cheaper rate to buy at than the others coming in. But some people said, “Why would I buy it instead of paying $500 in rent?” Now it’s called a condo, but it looks the same way. They just painted the walls and
installed a dishwasher and gave us a little inch bigger of a bathtub to make it into a whirlpool. They call it a whirlpool now.

However, an alumna of Family Matters reflected on the limitations of low income workers to access any new job opportunities in the community:

My question is, if the housing is not affordable anywhere in the neighborhood for people to live in, who’s going to be able to work at those stores? I’m trying to find a second job, but I’m trying to make it within walking distance.

Many of the teens’ families, friends and neighbors have been displaced, sometimes more than once, while they search unsuccessfully to find a new way to stay in their rapidly changing community. As the face of the neighborhood changes along with the faces in it, it is the low-income individuals and families that are extremely limited in their ability to maintain the stable community they had created.

The teens talked about their views:

I don’t think that’s right to kick out all these people. Some people hardly can pay for what they’re living in now. They’re trying to change the rent and they keep on moving higher and higher and they are changing it to condos. They can hardly pay it now and won’t have anywhere to live.

Many of the teens’ families, friends and neighbors have been displaced, sometimes more than once, while they search unsuccessfully to find a new way to stay in their rapidly changing community.

I see how apartments are changed into condos and the rent also always goes up. I think it shouldn’t have to happen to the people living in our neighborhood because all the people I know have certain money problems. I don’t think we should change all of the apartments into condos because it’s like the number of buildings that are changing apartments into condos is rising. That’s hurting all the people that have lived there because they all have economic issues—they just cannot make that amount of money to pay the new prices.

We have to be aware that people do struggle with money and their jobs, so there should be affordable housing. Somebody could get laid off their job, or be kicked out of their apartment.

They also spoke of their own reactions to this upheaval:

We don’t want condos to come in. Not at North Point. Then we’ll have nowhere to live. I’ll have to live on the west side of Chicago.

Some of the people are getting kicked out of their apartments because they’re going condo. I feel sorry for them because they have to live on the streets. I feel feeling like my heart is going to crack because I’m a very sensitive little girl.

Yet this transitional moment also creates an opportunity for intentional change. These families are not alone in their struggle. Indeed, the strong history of Rogers Park is once again surfacing in the form of
community organizations mobilizing in resistance to changes that are threatening the economically and ethnically diverse community.

From the perspective of Philip Nyden, director of Loyola University’s Community Outreach Partnership Center, “a significant urban policy issue faced by many communities around the city and country is the pattern of displacement of low-income families from communities just when opportunities and investment start coming. If we can work with community organizations to demonstrate how a community can attract new investment and create opportunities for all residents, we can become a significant model for community development.” (Loyola University, 2003).

This perspective is implicit in the teen girls’ narratives:

I think if the government feels it’s necessary for apartments to be changed into condos, then they should also come up with an explanation. Like make certain jobs available that can provide the people in those buildings with work so they can make the amount of money that they’ll need to help them live in those condos.

If I could change one thing in my neighborhood, it would be to live in a house. Everybody else should have one too. Then they wouldn’t get kicked out of their apartment. I see old people and their kids are grown up and not around and so the old parents have to move by themselves. I feel sad for them. Some of my friends had to move away too and I don’t know where they went.

I don’t think it’s fair that they want to take down houses because the condo people are going to buy the land and people have to pay more money. A lot of people are happy with the home they’ve got and they don’t have more money. I worry because I see people laying in the corners of the street, just really hurting society.

My friend’s mom just started a new job and she can’t afford the new rent they’re expecting, so they’ll have to move away and she’ll lose her new job. It’s really insensitive of them. They’re wrong. If you know nothing about the people who live here and you just make a decision and that decision can really mess with people’s lives, you might not mean to, but politics can be very harsh and insensitive. It may be just a normal government thing, but it really puts a lot of pressure on the people here, economically.

Yet, at the same time that efforts have been made to stanch the past economic decline in Rogers Park, community leaders have also attempted to address the issue of affordable housing. Indeed, U.S. Congressional Representative Jan Schakowsky has made affordable housing a top priority in her own legislative district that includes Rogers Park and has told hundreds of community activists and neighborhood residents that affordable housing must become a national priority. Her office recently released statistics that showed the housing crisis is growing, both nationally and locally. In particular, the Chicago area needs at least 150,000 more affordable housing units. (Schakowsky, 2004).
“Development without displacement” has been a watchword for many in this complex community transition. Celebrating the community’s diversity has been upheld as a key factor in securing such a positive outcome.

Rudy Lubov, newly assigned Principal at Gale Elementary Community Academy, who grew up in Rogers Park herself, described in a recent interview with us the ways in which she values the unique diversity her community offers:

I’m very committed to bringing the community together. Racial divides maybe too strong a word, although in past history that wouldn’t have been too strong a term. Tension between the Hispanic and black community is there. And the white community. And now there’s a growing gay community. It’s a very, very diverse community. There’s economic diversity, ethnic diversity, religious diversity, racial diversity, gender diversity. So it’s a community that I think has a lot plusses because we really struggle to try to learn to live together but it’s certainly a very challenged community. My value is that diversity is a strength. It isn’t the diversity itself that makes the community strong. It’s the weaving together… that brings the power to the community… I think that is a wonderful opportunity.

Yet achieving that celebration has been difficult, in the view of developer Michael Glasser, President, Rogers Park Builders Group and Magellan Properties, as he spoke in a recent interview with us:

I don’t see enough community spirit. People need to relish it. This diversity needs to be promoted. The fact is that a lot of people love the idea of a stable mixed income community. I think that the efforts Kim DeLong of Family Matters, myself, and others that are working towards building bridges and promoting collaboration hold the key to building that community. Promoting our diversity can be a goal for everybody.

Local political leaders have heard from many community constituents and are proposing some resolution. Julie Hamos, Illinois Legislative Representative for the 19th District addressed the affordable housing issue when we interviewed her during our research project:

I think it’s an important and serious issue for Rogers Park, which is in part what drove me to take leadership on this at the state level. It was really my constituents who spoke about this need all day long, every day. They made me fully recognize that we needed to do something at the state policy level. It’s interesting that teenage girls would have this so much on their minds also. Of course they do because the quality of life of their families is so impacted… I think that government’s role should be to help provide an adequate supply of safe and decent affordable housing and to really also pursue a goal of a mixed income community.

One alumna remembered a specific community attempt to begin to address this issue:

Some people are trying to make things even. I remember a year ago or so they had a program at Gale Academy. If you wanted to get an apartment or condo, they would help you. If you put up a certain amount of money, they would match it. So, it was an equal opportunity for the people that lived in the neighborhood to stay there. A good amount of people did sign up, and a good amount just said no.

Others of the teen girls talked about their desire to voice their protest:

A friend of mine put a sign in the window that said, Vote for Affordable Housing. I put my sign in the window too. I went on a bus from Family Matters to look at houses that were affordable. Then they were going downtown to a rally.

I want to have a protest and I will come around the park and speak out that it’s unfair. It is unfair.
THE WORLD

The world is a place where we could be whoever or whatever we want to be.

The world is a place where we could play and play but please don’t get carried away.

The world is a place that we could adore, adore and explore more and more.

The world is a place where we could do it, if we set our mind to it.

The world is a place where we believe, believe, achieve and try to succeed.

The world is a place where there’s not a lot of love, well the only love is from their families or the ones who died above.

The world is a place that can’t really get along. They act like they don’t know the difference from doing right and doing wrong.

This world was made for me, my family and my friends and now from all of these conflicts I can tell it’s ‘bout to end.

This world is dark and cold inside
Now all I do is cry and cry.

And since friends and family keep passing away this world seems very very gray.

And most of these kids are very bad,
I know it makes their parents sad.

Young girls all make a lot of mistakes,
But with my world it will be okay.

Girls love their selves for who they are.
They see their selves all as stars.

Ever since I built this world with my hands
Everybody in the world loves to dance.

But now because we are believers
All of us are achievers.
Education

STEPHEN F. GALE COMMUNITY ACADEMY

6 18 GRADUATION 10 00
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PROMOTION 10 AM
Urban public schools have long faced challenges in providing their students with high quality learning opportunities in a safe environment. Prevailing social and economic conditions in the surrounding community, coupled with current political will on state and national levels, strongly impact funding capacities which, in turn, affect the level of instruction and the range of available support services. And in today’s social, political and economic contexts, low-income students of color are at particular risk related to their potential academic achievement. Indeed, while 7 percent of white adolescents nationwide dropped out of high school in 2001, 11% of black adolescents and 27 percent of Latino/a adolescents also dropped out. A full 45 percent of these dropouts was female. (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In Illinois, the black adolescent dropout rate was three times that of white adolescents. Illinois was one of five states across the U.S. with the largest such racial gap in dropout rates (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Still, amid these daunting statistics facing the teen girls and their peers in East Rogers Park, schools may offer a safer zone than these youth can find on nearby streets or perhaps even in their own homes. Yet educational administrators struggle against the rising tide of youth violence as they attempt to meet the challenge of maintaining safety at school.

Assistant Principal Steve Serikaku at Sullivan High School, where many Rogers Park youth attend, addressed these issues in a recent interview with us:

Every Chicago public high school has two uniformed police officers in the building. We have two disciplinarians, one male, one female. We let students know these are the people you go to if you have problems with others in the school. We go over sexual harassment in our advisories—an extension of home room where teachers, once a week, address study skills, life skills, and academic skills. It depends on the teacher whether materials are handed out to students to instruct them on what to do at school if there is a problem.

School-related violence is, in his assessment, largely determined by what comes into the building from the outside:

Incidents of violence are cyclical. Some years there’s more than others. A lot depends on what’s going on in the neighborhood. Particularly gang activity. Also, past history. Some kids started having problems with each other in elementary school and sometimes that continues and escalates.

At the same time, as researchers, it was striking to note that all of the young teens in this project who were at middle school or early high school grade levels were deeply invested in their own education:

I have perfect attendance this year. Ever since I started nine years ago—from kindergarten to 8th grade—I’ve been absent no more than five times, probably not even that many, I have a record of being at school.

My main goal is to do my best. The beginning of last year was a turning point in my life. Things that were a big deal in 5th, 6th and 7th grades, didn’t make sense anymore. Now I look to just do the best that I can. I have people around me every day that are pushing me to do better. So, with them helping me, I’m working hard so I can feel I’m accomplishing something.

In 2000, adults with higher levels of education were more likely to participate in the work force than those with less education. About 80 percent of adults with a college degree had jobs, compared to 65 percent of
those who were high school graduates. In contrast, only 43 percent of those who were not high school graduates were employed (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

The teen girls, even at their young ages, were aware of the significance of these challenges:

While 7 percent of white adolescents nationwide dropped out of high school in 2001, 11% of black adolescents and 27 percent of Latino/a adolescents also dropped out. A full 45 percent of these dropouts was female.

I think education is the number one priority. There is no possible way in life without education. It doesn’t even have to be about going to school and learning mathematics. Education comes from more than just math and reading. You can be on the street and you can learn something. To me, education is just something that can help you out in the future. Just like me talking to you now, if you describe a word I don’t know, you can say something to me and it will help me in the future.

Several of the young teens in eighth grade have already made specific plans about high school involvement:

One of my close friends came back from college and she put everything in perspective for me. When you get to high school, they’re going to have you analyze the simplest thing in reading, and writing is going to have to be ten pages long. She said that they have you looking at different points of view, like in philosophy. And that basically everything that we’re doing now is nothing compared to what we’re going to do.

(When I get to) high school, I’ve already picked out like a dozen clubs I want to be in—drama club, photography, school newspaper, yearbook committee and student council. I was thinking about joining cheerleading. I don’t know—I always looked at it as being just one way. Now I’m realizing I can experience something like that to prove to myself that I can be a completely different way, around completely different people than I usually hang around with.

The teen girls recognized the significance of school in their lives, not only in the present but also in preparing for their future:

School is important, so you can learn what you have to do to go to high school and then to college to study to become a doctor.

I want to go to college where I can live on campus. I love meeting people and want to be involved in college experiences. I think I’m gonna find out in high school about what I’ll want to major in when I go to college.

Their voices are echoed in statistics that indicate that higher education does have substantial financial benefits. On average, wages increase with every extra year of education. In 2000, someone with a bachelor’s degree could earn on average $16,200 more each year than someone with a high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Vice Principal Serikaku of Sullivan High School expressed concern that only a few parents showed they were involved in their teenager’s high school experience by attending school meetings. Although he assumed that many adults thought their teens were old enough to make their own decisions at that age, he emphasized how crucial parental influence is for teens.
This vital relationship is reflected in the following views of the teen girls:

In order to get to be an actress, I have to know about money to keep track of what I make. I’ll need to know how to read so I’ll play roles. My dad, who visits me each year, said he was going to take me to New York to check out some places to study and act.

I want to be a doctor like my dad, who I see sometimes. And I want to be a hair doer too, like my friend. She’s 16 and lives across from me. She’s in school studying other things, but she does it for friends.

Most parents want their kids to go to school and get a good job, but if you don’t go to school, you probably won’t have a good job.

Remarkably, the teens and their parents embodied the statistical profile portrayed at the national level, as well. In stark contrast to stereotypes of unemployed people of color, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2000, the work force participation rates for adult blacks and Latinos/as with high school diplomas were higher than the average for all people with similar levels of education. The same reality held true for people of color with a bachelor’s degree—they participated in the work force at a higher rate than the average for whites (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001).

However, these young students cannot be expected to sustain their positive energy and momentum without a well-developed infrastructure in school to support their continued focus and motivation. Indeed, we saw that the teen girls faced ongoing issues that interfered with their learning:

It’s hard for me to concentrate at school because of kids always coming around each other, laughing and talking. I’m thinking to my mom about moving me out of that classroom, trying to put me in some other class. The (standardized) test is coming up soon and I don’t want to be left behind because I wasn’t able to do well. I was reading in class and I couldn’t really summarize it because the kids were talking. I asked my teacher if I could sit in the hallway, but she said no.

Negative consequences related to poor classroom climate can be dangerous:

Sometimes I don’t feel safe at school. The teachers argue and then the students fight with each other. Like, we had a fire drill. The teacher was arguing with the kids and then we couldn’t get out of the building because she had to keep right here with the kids. I went down with another class, because if it was really a fire, they would probably be burned because they were there arguing.

A turbulent classroom climate can also be conducive to escalating peer conflicts:

There’s fighting among everybody in my class. There were two girls fighting the
other day because one girl had a ticket to a game and another bit her and they started fighting.

They have fights at school. What happens depends on who the person is. If you’re in a fight with someone that’s a friend of other people around, they’re not going to help you. But if they know you and you are getting beat up, they’ll jump in there. Sometimes there’ll be 100 people on one person. But if it was one on one, they probably would have let them fight and then later broke it up. Sometimes they’ll be having bets.

Wages increase with every extra year of education. In 2000, someone with a bachelor’s degree could earn on average $16,200 more each year than someone with a high school diploma.


Sometimes there’s a fight, say, in the science room at school. Everybody’s rooting for one person. Everybody will jump in. It will be 20 people stopping one person in the corner.

Fights often began or ended outside the school building, yet still on school grounds:

Around my school, there are some people that just blow things out of proportion. They think that the only way of resolving a situation is by fighting. Most of the kids find it interesting, like humorous, I guess, when someone’s having problems. I tell my closest friends that it’s not the smartest thing to do, to stand around watching, thinking it’s funny. If something goes wrong, and somebody whips out a weapon, you could get hurt.

Several of the teens agreed on their reactions to such situations:

I love all my friends, but if you get into a fight, that’s your business. I’m sorry. I’m not injuring myself for anybody.

While I try to encourage my friends not to stick around it, I would also not put myself in danger. I go straight home after school because I’m usually busy anyway, so I don’t have time to just hang around.

Around my school, you have to be protective of yourself, because the guys in my school are always for just whatever they want. Girls are not known to be on the same level—they are at a lower level.

The boys in my class say bad stuff to the girls in class. But I don’t say anything to them because I don’t like to seem tough like that. They say stuff like “Suck dicks.” The teachers get angry at the boys. I think the girls feel upset because every time something like that happens to them, they come and tell me and we go in the bathroom and I have a talk with them. I tell them that they need to be well focused and to ignore them.

An older teen, about to finish high school, also has apparently struggled in such a chilly environment:
I go to high school, about an hour away from my house. Mostly, I don’t enjoy the people there... I kind of feel like an outsider. I have people there that I talk to, but not people that I can say are friends. My school attendance has been pretty bad.

She also expressed ambivalence about the value of continuing her education:

I’ve been applying to college and have been accepted to two of them already. One of the biggest challenges facing young women in their teens around here... is having motivation. A lot of my own challenges have to do with the fact that some of the people working have gone to graduate programs. But none of the jobs have college as a requirement for work or even say you have to graduate. That kind of leaves you thinking that if they can make it, they’re not on the streets, so why can’t I do that, too? Why do I have to go to college? No one else is making me go, but if I don’t go, what would I be doing?

After hearing the teen girls describe these school experiences, we were left to wonder how the academic infrastructure was dealing with such a chilly classroom climate. Recent research indicates that schools which place top priority on maintaining order and control over students have become increasingly vulnerable to violence. Urban schools, in particular, where social and economic conditions have added considerably to the extent and degree of the problem, have struggled with these ineffective approaches (Noguera, 1995).

On the other hand, educational alternatives have begun across the country to create humane learning environments that both counter escalating violence and transform social relationships within schools. A remarkable outcome is that students in these alternative programs largely feel less alienated, threatened and repressed (Noguera, 1995). These include: conflict resolution programs that teach students how to settle disputes nonviolently; mentoring programs that pair students with adult role models that provide youth with individual attention, support and guidance; curricula to help students avoid violent situations and to explore ethical and moral issues related to violent behavior; and counseling programs that establish partnerships between schools and social service agencies to provide direct services to students (Noguera, 1995)

The youth at Gale Elementary Community Academy have seen individual educators acting on some of these positive principles. As one teen said:

All my teachers are like, personally involved with me. All my teachers are just very protective of me.

Another has taken advantage of the after-school tutoring programs mandated by the Chicago Public Schools:

I got a tutor the other day to help me with math, because it’s really challenging.

and in the following excerpt of one of the teens, we saw how a teacher skilled in conflict resolution taught more than two students how deal with a difficult situation:

A guy at my school asked me out a lot of times. I turned him down every time but he couldn’t take the rejection very well. He’d just go off the top. At one point when I told him “No”, he said, “I’m gonna kick your ass.” I said, “You know, I don’t think that’s necessary.” My teacher sat us both down and told him how to take rejection. We had a big lesson with the
whole class about it and then with all three of the eighth grade classes. I think our being able to talk it out rather than blowing it out of proportion helped. Now he knows you can’t always go off the top. Not all girls are gonna want to go out with you. He has to be cautious of consequences, since we’re no longer gonna be known as babies when we leave eighth grade.

These very issues may be addressed and specific supports expanded by Rudy Lebov, the newly assigned Principal of Gale Elementary Community Academy, who recently said in an interview:

One of the things that we’re going to do at the school is what I’m calling restructuring the school. We will put in systems and people that will help to provide some stability and constancy, and ground the community. A multi-tiered effort, it will work at several different levels at the same time. Inside the school, we’ll establish a different set of expectations for discipline, creating an educational environment that is more conducive to learning and less disruptive. We’re going to be teaching the children conflict resolution skills, to help them handle issues that come up among themselves. We’re going to do something on classroom organizational skills for teachers so that they can have more support in trying to establish a good environment conducive to learning in the classroom.

Gale Academy also intends to take a leadership role within the community of East Rogers Park as well. Principal Lubov outlined the following steps in support of this direction:

In the community, we’re going to continue to work with all the wonderful community agencies that are in Rogers Park, including the expansion of Parent Patrol, working with the police, Family Matters, and counseling agencies. All this is to create a tighter safety net of services around the children and families in the school.

Indeed, the alumnae reported that they have benefited enormously in just such ways through their participation at Family Matters:

I attribute a lot to Family Matters because I went through the latch key after school program all the way to the Sisters of Struggle. If it wasn’t for Family Matters, I really don’t think I would have gotten as far as I have. I would probably be a very quiet person that would just be content with anything and not strive for something more.

It was at Family Matters that they felt engaged in hands-on learning:

It’s in retrospect that I realize, “Oh, wow! I was learning all along and I didn’t even know.” I would go with the flow of learning what this was, even though I really didn’t say anything. You didn’t feel like a freak, because everybody was on the same level.

The alumnae also recalled that Family Matters found ways to include parents in what they were teaching the youth:

I used to go home and tell my mother, “Look, they gave me brochures. They explain
things to me.” And my mother would look at them and say, “I didn’t know that.”

Of particular value were the vital ways in which Family Matters prepared the youth for their future roles in the workplace:

They did a really good job in teaching us how to act in the workplace. We even had simulated interviews. They took us to a place where they taught us how to eat in public properly. They did great, too, with all the credentials that we got from sitting on the board of leadership, learning how to apply for grants, and chances for public speaking. As soon as I went on job interviews, the interviewer would look at me and say, “And you’re how old?” I’d say, “nineteen,” or “twenty.” And he’d say, “And you know how to do all this?”

I applied for a job at Wal-Mart and I brought my resume. The person said, “This is Wal-Mart. You don’t need a resume.” I asked her to take it anyway and put it in my file. I got the job. When people come down to deciding, “Do I want to pick him over her?”, I think we get picked more often because of all the information we put down.

And if you put Kim (DeLong, Family Matter’s Executive Director) down as a reference, then you just have gotten the job. You’ll be starting on Monday. She’ll speak so highly of you. I don’t think there’s ever been a girl in the program that didn’t feel like Kim was a mother to her. When I was there, she’d call my name out, “Come into the office.” I’d ask, “Did I do something bad?” She’d say, “Why do you always say that?” When we’d get in there, she’d just praise you so much—“You did so great on this or this...”

One teen expressed her concern for those youth that fall without such a safety net:

For other young people, where they do not want to go to school, an adult may give them a choice of going to school or getting a job. That way, they think it can keep them off the street. But then again, adults also have to understand that giving a teen that much responsibility of choosing and then working at an early age can put them on the street anyway, because they really don’t know where to go.

She saw the larger adult community as a source of support:

Most adults in the neighborhood think that kids are the future, so they want us to stay in school.

In stark contrast to stereotypes of unemployed people of color, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2000, the work force participation rates for adult blacks and Latinos/as with high school diplomas were higher than the average for all people with similar levels of education. The same reality held true for people of color with a bachelor’s degree—they participated in the work force at a higher rate than the average for whites.

Friends
Finding, making, keeping and letting go of friends and friendships are an enormous part of the developmental work of adolescence (Phillips, 1998). Just as young teens begin to explore changing relationships with family, searching for their individuality from that group, they are simultaneously drawn to their peers. Indeed, this quest to “belong” to a new group of friends often competes with and sometimes overrides a teen’s striving for educational achievement.

In the teens’ voices we heard the many ways in which they valued their friends. Some emphasized the protective factor of being helped by and helping others:

Growing up female in my neighborhood is not hard because I know a lot of people and a lot of people know me so I don’t really get picked on.

I try to help my girlfriends. One of them was sitting at her desk and a boy came up and said something to her and she said something back. When she told me, I told her she doesn’t have to always say something back, she can just let things go.

Beyond the helping value that friends can provide, the very nature of young adolescent friendships has been recently explored by social science researchers. Teen friendships typically provide the primary forum in which young females construct their sense of self. Their self-esteem, fluctuating in this developmental stage of life, has been identified as responsive to the opinions of peers, soaring or plummeting with their positive or negative feedback (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). A young teen girl’s sense of self is also shaped by messages from the larger culture about what it means to be a sexually attractive female (Fine, 1989). These messages are often dissected, analyzed and applied by teen girls in their friendships with other young women.

The teen girls gave colorful descriptions of their friendships that fit a traditional developmental profile of female adolescents:

One of the greatest challenges right now for me is just teenage drama. That has to do with a lot of gossiping and a lot of like, eavesdropping and back-stabbing, the usual things. It’s like, something you have to sit down and try and figure it out.

By the time we were in fifth or sixth grade, my friends that are girls started asking me to choose between them. I said to them, “I’m not gonna choose between friends. A friend wouldn’t make you choose between other friends. If you don’t like her, that’s your problem. I like her okay, and I’m not going to choose between you guys. If you don’t want to talk to me, fine.” And they didn’t talk to me for like, a year.

While these dynamics may be typical for teen girls, that does not mean that they saw their relationships as completely positive or even harmless. Actually, the teen girls often talked about serious consequences of negativity in their young female friendships:

When boys are together, they just hang out. With girls, it’s a little more complicated. They will put someone down really bad, not like boys. If a girl puts another girl down, the girl will take it seriously and be hurt. She’ll have low self-esteem and she might develop psychological damage. Boys just get physical
and pretty much get over it. For girls, it stays with them, making them feel bad. Then they start looking at their bodies wrong.

While we recognized that asserting their independence makes these adolescents feel mature, we were also concerned that adults involved with teens need to help them find other, safer ways to express their individuality.

Girls get on each other’s case about how they look. They are very into their outer look. Friends will just be playing with each other and say in a playful way: “Your hair’s messed up or you’re really skinny, or you have no boobs.” But some take it to another level and they just go a little crazy. Then it hurts.

The teen girls outlined lengthy and complex contrasts between male and female friendships:

Sometimes girls can get past competing and back stabbing. But if it’s something like, over a boy that you’ve really liked for a long time, some people don’t get past that. If there are a lot of people around that are very egotistic. People will break out and fight to show that they’re better than the other. Sometimes girls get into physical fighting, but if you do a survey and you have to like, summarize it, girls are usually just all about arguing and back stabbing and never get over it. And guys are physical.

I have girlfriends and guy friends both. I used to have more guy friends because I was a tomboy. But then I spent the whole summer with one of my closest girl friends and she kind of got me into the girlie habits. Now I have a lot more girlfriends that I talk to because, you know, they’re dealing with the same body functions and situations.

I get along better with boys than girls because girls fight over petty stuff. Girls pick at the littlest things. They will fight over lip gloss, screaming at each other. Then they’ll get mad and throw the lip gloss at you. You should not be fighting over lip gloss. You can get over it in five seconds but then you feel like, “I want to win this,” and you start arguing and then you hold it against this person. But you know, boys won’t fight over lip gloss. Except when they do it comically.

They saw the benefits of having guy friends as simpler and clearer:

Guy friends are a whole lot simpler. I have one friend that’s always there for me. He sees me like a sister and we’re always there for each other. If he sees something’s wrong with me, he’ll ask me about it. I have a lot of guy friends that do that. Like if we were just hanging out in the park and anybody came up to me and started saying stuff to me, they would immediately jump in and say, “You know what, don’t say stuff to her like that.”

Some of my guy friends are a little older or younger than me. Some are overprotective in a good way. They check out if I’m gonna have a boyfriend, or something like that.
Guys help me with my guy problems. Like my guy friends talk about how guys react to things, helping me out. One guy friend, in particular, has a lot of stuff he’s going through and vice versa. We kind of help each other out. And the things he’s going through keep my mind open. His situation is like a big issue nowadays. I have to look from another perspective. I can’t just look at it one way.

Indeed, friends meant a lot to the teens:

I have pretty good friendships. I have friends that if you tell secrets to them, no one else would know. And I have friends that I joke around with, and then other friends that I can talk seriously to.

If I’m doing something wrong, my friends will tell me and help me out. They won’t just sit there and let me do it. If I was going to make a mistake, they would make sure I didn’t.

My friends support me throughout any tough times I have. I will talk about problems and they give me solutions. Or if not, they tell me to talk to other people that are their friends because they have more experience in that topic. Basically, they give me their opinion and their feedback and tell me that it’s my decision, but they’ll always be there for me.

The teen girls easily shifted from their descriptions of friendships to discussions about romantic relationships. One girl spoke about her decisions concerning sexual activity:

I’m 12 and my boyfriend is 13. But I don’t feel pressured by him or anybody else to have sex. We talked about this. We were both watching TV and there was a guy on a show that made his girlfriend have sex with him. My boyfriend said, “I’ll never make you do that.” Any questions he asks me that are kind of private, he always says, “You don’t have to answer this question, only if you want to.” He’s always making sure I’m okay with it.

Another spoke about the pressures some girls succumb to, to become sexually active:

Some of my friends are being pressured into getting into sex stuff. (In school,) girls aren’t supposed to go to the bathroom when the boys are around. My friend goes over there anyway, and she lets them put her on the wall, with her legs open and such. Mostly girls like her do it because the boys are their friends and feel they have to. The boys are putting pictures on the girls and they don’t say anything. They just laugh.

The chances of pregnancy are ever-present in the lives of these young teens. Indeed, the numbers of teen girls in the East Rogers Park neighborhood who are pregnant appear to be significant. Unlike recent national
statistics that chart a decrease in adolescent pregnancies (SIECUS, 2002), several alumnae of *Family Matters* agreed that the rate of teen pregnancies in East Rogers Park seems to be greater than just five or six years ago.

One alumna observed:

**Now there are more teenage pregnancies (than when we were teens). People younger than me have got babies. Some have two babies.**

Nationwide, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that over the course of the 1990’s, the pregnancy rate among black women ages 15-19 fell 20%. Among white teens, pregnancy rates declined 16%, while Latina teen pregnancies declined 6% (SIECUS). However, the Illinois statistics mirrored what the alumnae saw on the streets of East Rogers Park: instead of local teen pregnancy rates declining along with the rest of the country, Illinois ranked as the fifth highest state in number of adolescent pregnancies, increasing over the same decade from 103 births per 1,000 teens to 106 births per 1,000 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004).

When the teen girls spoke about teenage pregnancy, they usually shifted from talking about themselves and their own romantic relationships, and rather, spoke in general about the topic:

**There’s a 6th grader at my school who was in 6th grade last year too, with my brother. Now he’s in 7th grade but she’s not. She had a baby and couldn’t go onto 7th grade for missing so many days.**

A girl described some of the difficulties she had in seventh grade, in trying to stay friends with others who were making poor decisions related to being very young parents:

**Sometimes my friends put pressure on me. Like my friend was pregnant, then had the baby. She told me and another friend that she was going to skip school. I was really scared for her because she didn’t come to school for a week. After that, she said, “Thanks for not telling.” I felt we should have told, but we didn’t. The next time she was absent, the teacher caught her. She looked outside the window and there my friend was, running around with some other kids. After that, she said if I told on her the next time, she’d never be my friend again. I told her, “I’d rather tell,” and I did the next time. She stopped being my friend. It’s like, if you do something that they just want you to do, they’ll just go on asking you to do anything that they can get from you, and they’ll rely on that.**

Several of the teen girls discussed their experiences and reactions to other young friends with babies, indicating problematic relationships:

**I have a friend who’s in 7th grade now. She had a baby by her boyfriend who’s 15 or something. What made it so bad was that everything was fine when they were going together. Then after she had the baby, he was gone. He doesn’t even claim her. He already had a child and he was hardly claiming that child. Now he doesn’t want to claim this one. He’s like, “That’s not my child.”**
The teens talked about ideas possibly held by young women that became pregnant and then young single mothers. They agreed that unrealistic hopes of changing their partners were very common:

**Girls are stupid when it comes to things like that. If you know a guy has a child and he’s not taking care of that child, what makes you think you’re going to be any different to him?**

Another teen suggested that emotional denial played a part in some young women’s choices:

**You can meet a person and you can know that person is mentally, physically, or economically not ready for it. You don’t have to put yourself through all that. There are just little signs, but people ignore them because they want what they want when they want it.**

Most of the teens did not see themselves as vulnerable to getting pregnant. However, a few did not view teen pregnancy and motherhood as problematic:

**I dream a lot. And so I’m just one of those people who just think it’s possible. There’s always a way of working something out. But see, I’m Puerto Rican and so I have the Puerto Rican rationale to have it work out.**

**Some girls are strong and they take control of their lives. Probably the difference is experience. No, it’s probably more than that—is the difference in how a person is raised? I don’t know. I mean, I think I’m like, really good compared to all the people my age. If you ask me why my friends are in trouble with babies, I think it has to do with experiences that they’ve been around. They think that it’s just not possible that it couldn’t work.**

Another behavior may possibly have contributed to the prevalence of pregnancies: the practice of unprotected sex. In 2003, national statistics indicated that sexually active teen females were less likely than older women to practice contraception without interruption over the course of a year (Guttmacher, 2004). Even more disturbing is the reality that a sexually active teen female who does not use contraceptives has a 90% chance of becoming pregnant within one year. (Guttmacher, 1999).

An older teen who had access to birth control and had used it in the past, told of her decision to stop using such protection during sexual relations:

**I had a boyfriend. We broke up recently. We did have sex, but I didn’t feel like he was pressuring me. I was on the birth control pill for awhile but then I went off.**

She spoke about friends who were also sexually active without protection with boyfriends that did not treat them well:

**I know there are a lot of problems with my girl friends that are involved with guys that don’t respect them and don’t treat them right.**
An alumna of Family Matters described how she learned to avoid such situations:

I have my own job and I’m going to school to be a pharmacist. I had a fiance but he’s just my friend now. He got demoted. Family Matters taught me that. If he’s not treating you well, kick him to the curb. I remember that person who came to talk with us about relationships and violence. They said, it’s a cycle. Every few weeks, you’ll get into an argument. Then you’ll get flowers and candy. Then it’ll become they can’t stand you. Then it goes to abuse. And I remember looking at that cycle and saying to myself, “That’s not gonna be me! That’s not gonna be me!”

Interestingly, a younger teen spoke about observing just that situation in many older pregnant and parenting teens. She also told of her reactions:

There are pregnant teens around here and their boyfriend isn’t really around for them. I’ll be sitting with my friends and I’ll see this lady walk by with a baby. She’s asking the boyfriend to go get her something and he won’t do it. I ask myself and my friends, “If you were in their shoes, what would you do? Stay and wait for him to get the things you need or go get them yourself?”

One of the most important things these teen girls said they needed was higher education. Yet national data indicate that attaining such a goal becomes much more elusive for teen mothers. Indeed, 7 in 10 teen mothers complete high school but are less likely than women who delay childbearing to go to college (Advocates for Youth, 1999).

One teen summed up her feelings about staying connected with friends that were making life decisions unlike those she wanted for herself:

So it’s hard to stay friends if they don’t want to get their grades right and they just fool around like that. I try to have friends that are going to high school.

The alumnae of Family Matters, all pursuing higher education, shared their ideas about having children. One indicated that she had access to all the babies she would ever need in her life:

We have friends that have kids. Those are my babies.

Another clearly stated her priorities and where children came in that ranking:

I can’t afford a boyfriend. I want to get my teaching degree before I start with kids.

Several said that they have had everyday experiences with other women’s children, which have given them realistic views of the responsibilities involved with caring for them:

I’m just gonna tell the truth. I’m very selfish. I’m too selfish to have kids. I think that every day. At the day care center I work at, they call me Mom and the kids just drive me crazy. Every day, I come home saying, “I’m not having kids”. 
I saw my friend’s baby for ten minutes. When the baby didn’t want to go to sleep on her own and just wanted to sit in my arms, I was just like, “Unh, unh.”

I’m just trying to ensure that I have a good life, and make sure that when I do have children, that they stay straight and that I can provide for them and still be happy. So, for me, it’s doing things that are cautious and with a good heart.

The dialogue about teen pregnancy is public and ongoing. But another pressing issue brought up by these teen girls does not have social visibility, yet is troubling: young girls dating older men. National data indicate that 64% of sexually active 15-17 year old women have partners who are within 2 years of their age. However, 29% have sexual partners who are 3-5 years older, and 7% have partners 6 or more years older.

At the same time, most sexually active young men have reported that their female partners are close to their age: almost half of the partners of 19- year old men are 18 years old. On the other hand, as many as 11% of 19 –year old men reported that they had sexual partners between 13 –15 years of age (Guttmacher, 2004). Very little data exist about still older men and teen women as their sexual partners. However, it has been established that fathers of babies born to teen mothers are likely to be older than the women. Approximately 1 in 5 infants born to unmarried minors are fathered by men 5 or more years older than the mother (Guttmacher, 2004).

Several of the girls were eager to discuss this topic. They knew of other young teens in such situations and raised their own questions and concerns:

“My friend is with a guy who’s like, 20 or 22. She’s only 11.”

Another young teen immediately reacted:

That’s not that crazy. That’s not that big of an age difference.

Still another teen voiced her contrasting concerns:

I have a friend that’s an 8th grader and has an older boy friend. I said, ‘Are you sure you’re ready for this?’ And she’s like, “Yeah, I’m sure.’ I said, “Well, look how old you are and look how old he is’, and she just laughed. “But it doesn’t matter,” she said, “because age is nothing but a number.”

And again, different views emerged. Yet another teen replied:

I like that.

Then a young teen spoke about her own situation:

I can’t talk for all people, but I can talk for myself. I’m not involved, but I’ve met a guy that’s 16. I’m 14. I’m in 8th grade and he’s a sophomore in high school. He’s away at school, so I have freedom. We talk about everything. He’s my boyfriend now and he would never do anything. We talked about the whole sexual thing, and it’s up to me. He knows that I’m not ready and so he’s not even

Instead of local teen pregnancy rates declining along with the rest of the country, Illinois ranked as the fifth highest state in number of adolescent pregnancies, increasing over the same decade.

—National Center for Health Statistics, 2004
mentioning it. So I think it all depends on the type of guy you’re dealing with. Now I met this other guy who happens to be 17 and I’ve been talking to him. I don’t know—I’m attracted to him. He’s really nice, but because he’s older than me, people take it to another level.

Another teen responded:

He isn’t that much older than you.

Still another 8th grader reflected on her perspective about dating older men:

All guys have expectations, but I’ve been told that for 16 and 17 year old guys, their minds just think about buns, buns, buns, buns, you know. I ended up going through that phase where I’m looking for a serious relationship, but for me to be dealing with an older person, they might have expectations. I think it’s pretty rare that a guy respects your desires when you say you’re not ready. Other guys are interested in having fun. It’s rare to meet a person that’s willing to respect you.

Another teen spoke of her cousin’s situation:

My cousin likes an older guy. She’s 15 and the guy is like 28 or 29.

Several others reacted rapidly:

Ohhh.

Old man.
If I cared about her, I’d be concerned. She might be in danger.

That seems like you’re dating your own father. I think that is just wrong because for all that teen knows, that really could be illegal, isn’t that?”

This launched a discussion that the teens said no one has answered yet for them—what is statutory rape and would a guy who is an older teen be as guilty as, say a 40-something-year old man if he had sex with a young teen girl?

The teens questioned the rationale that minors are not judged to be capable of making a fully informed decision. In the following reactions, we saw a developmentally appropriate adolescent response, a protest to being treated by her mother as a child, become intertwined with a risky rejection of a law that is aimed at protecting minors from sexual predators:

I don’t like that because it’s like one person setting up a whole law based on what he or she thinks. Everyone’s not like you. My mom does that all the time. I’m 13. She’s thinking like, a situation would be like me being 2 years old and the guy being 18, you know? She’s like, “He’s gonna want this and he’s gonna do that and you’re gonna buy into that.”
I’ve been told that when you’re young, you don’t know what you want yet. If a person came and told me that, I would literally just cut them off before they finished that sentence. To tell me that I don’t know what I’m talking about or what I’m feeling—you’re not me. That’s all.

It is important for all adults that read this to know what is going on in the lives of some girls. While we recognized that asserting their independence makes these adolescents feel mature, we were also concerned that adults involved with teens need to help them find other, safer ways to express their individuality. Hearing these teen girls describe their experiences and express their views about dating older men left us quite concerned. We realized that this is a vulnerability that has not been adequately addressed by adults working with young teen girls. General ignorance of the laws concerning statutory rape is only one part of the picture that, for lack of adult attention, has become distorted. It is essential that we adults recognize the risks these uninformed teens are exposed to. They are unaware of the dangers of adult sexual predators preying on pre-teens. There is an urgent need for the community to hold such men accountable for their deviant, illegal behavior. Young teens must be educated about ways to identify sexual predators, report them to responsible, responsive adults, and learn to view adherence to the laws about statutory rape as part of their own self-protection. At the same time, we must communicate these important messages in a way that respects their adolescent developmental task at hand: asserting their independence and craving the feelings of being grown-up.

As one teen girl said:

**The law’s that way to protect the young person.**
Families
In the first national study of young teen girls' academic, emotional and social development, research findings ran counter to the stereotype that girls of color are victims of low self-esteem (AAUW, Shortchanging Girls, 1991). For example, data indicated that black girls began with and were better able to retain higher levels of self-esteem through adolescence than their white and Latina counterparts. That strong self-esteem was tied to the girls' closeness to their families. In addition, research on Latino/a families similarly suggests the central importance of the family unit and respectful relations between children and parents (Taylor, 1996).

Connected to that negative stereotype of low self esteem are many images of girls of color growing up in less than optimal conditions: in low-income families, often headed by single mothers, living in urban communities assaulted by violence and crime. Although such characterizations do describe the living conditions of many such youth, these research data about high levels of self-esteem and self-worth, in black teen girls in particular, highlight the reality that these adolescents are often remarkably resilient and adaptive. Recent demographic statistics indicate that 28 percent of all US children under age 18 live with one parent. In the vast majority of these situations, that one parent is a mother. Many children of color, especially, are being raised in single-parent households: 55 percent of African-American children were living in a single parent, mother-headed household, with 27 percent of these families headed by women who had never married (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998).

Still, scholars have long documented the strengths inherent in many close-knit families of color. For instance, black parents and grandparents instill in children traits of assertiveness, independence, inner strength and perseverance (Greene, 1990). Additionally, recent research indicates that Latina families in the U.S. often share many values and beliefs, especially those related to the central importance of the family unit and respect for adults (Taylor, 1996). Beyond these familial values, data from recent studies conducted by the American Association of University Women suggest that there is something positive and powerful that families of color are communicating to their young teen girls (American Association of University Women, 2001). This is supported by other research data involving black parents, which suggest that stories of their own personal, painful experiences with prejudice and institutional racism may help adolescent daughters understand the racial oppression that affects their own experiences. In this way, teen girls of color may be better able to resist larger cultural messages that could harm their emerging sense of themselves (Ward, 1996).

Throughout this project, we have seen evidence of family strengths that can be found in forms that may not fit white middle class ideal. There are many complexities and challenges presented in the lives of the teen girls' families, but we also see ample evidence that these teens and their families meet these challenges head on.

The teen girls often spoke of the positive values of close relationships with their mothers:

My mom helps me if I’m having trouble in school. She tells me what to do—that I should talk to my teacher or that she’ll talk to my teacher for me. Or if I’m having trouble with my friends, she tells me to talk to them. If that doesn’t work, just don’t hang out with them anymore.

Sometimes I talk to my mom and I tell her what’s happening. We talk most of the time and she just tells me to try to do my best and keep going to school and if someone says something to you, ignore it or tell someone.

Researchers note that the most consistent message that many girls of color get from their mothers is to be self-reliant and resourceful (Collins, 1986).

A young teen girl mirrored such a relationship in this way:

Me and my mom, we have a wonderful relationship. I tell her almost everything, even though there are things I don’t think that she needs to know. And certain situations, she doesn’t feel necessary to talk about because she knows I know what to do. Like, we talk about some situations when the time is right. She is just everything to me. She’s always told me that no matter what I want to do, make sure I’m doing it because it makes me happy. And that she’ll be there, supporting me.
Additionally, mothers of color are generally seen as prime educators who are responsible for continuing the cultural traditions of the past and supporting the community’s future (Collins, 1990). However, recent research findings suggest that these women are repeatedly challenged to develop effective coping strategies for an increasing array of problems, ranging from economic injustices to domestic violence (Cauce, et.al., 1996). For instance, tensions and conflicts around being bicultural or multicultural are apparent in many Latina mother-daughter relationships, given the mother’s roles as the bearer and guardian of culture (Taylor, 1996). Research findings indicate that these mothers may also have possible ambivalence in educating daughters to ‘fit in’ and simultaneously ‘be themselves’. Researchers suggest that a Latina daughter must answer a key question for herself: How can she go beyond her mother’s views and yet stay in relationship with her at the same time? (Taylor, 1996).

One frequently occurring issue, that of language barriers, can further complicate complex communications between Latina teen girls and their mothers. Yet this very issue often becomes a valuable asset for these girls, who, by necessity, become their families’ translators in official dealings outside the family. Daughters who provide their non-English speaking parents with such support often develop strong self-reliance and independence, while also enhancing their loyalty to their families.

Indeed, recent research indicates that many mothers of color are very concerned about how to both support their daughters’ desire for autonomy and help keep them safe. Regardless of their cultural backgrounds, research suggests that these mothers of teen girls typically demonstrated love for their children by working hard to provide for them, and by enforcing strict rules for their safety (Ward, 1996). Yet teen girls of color live in a dominant culture that has been marked by racism, sexism, classism and ethnocentrism. Beyond the realm of family relationships, teen girls of color often are encouraged to construct an identity that views their race as positive and valued. This process of “self-creation” depends on the girls’ ability to invoke an “oppositional gaze”: to observe the social world critically, and to oppose ideas and ways of being that are disempowering to the self (hooks, 1992). Latina teen girls, in particular, say they “have to watch” for what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins calls “controlling images” (Collins, 1990). Collins indicates that these teens are aware that these negative stereotypes about Latinas prevent people from knowing “who you are”.

Several young teens, aware of these complex issues, described close connections with their mothers:

My mom studied psychology for a while and she had a lot of homework. Sometimes she would ask me for help. We would sit down and read the information and have discussions about it. I think I learned to be a perfectionist from my mother. She loves school. She went two years ago and wants to go again. She used to make these nice drawings and I kind of drew, too. Whenever she had a paper when I was little, we would do homework at the same table. We’d just sit there, so she’d make sure I did it. I would watch her erase, draw again, erase, and draw some more and erase again. That’s how I learned what it takes to get good at something.

I could turn to my mom if I have a problem. She tells me about everything, about drugs and stuff, and I listen. I’m close to my baby cousin, too. She talks a lot but I don’t know what she’s saying.

Research findings indicate that by acknowledging the unfairness of racism, sexism, classism or ethnocentrism, parents of color can create conditions in which children feel safe in placing their confidence in parental authority. This dialogue may also help young teens trust that adults close to them may know the way out of such pain (Ward). Schools can also provide additional supports if they are places where the identities of girls of color are nurtured by including their families, cultures and communities. Such a positive school climate can assist young teen girls of color to confront the challenge of upholding their family-based values while simultaneously being part of a larger culture that often emphasizes individualism.

As the American Association of University Women’s research findings suggest, it is from this very conflict that a successful outcome may emerge: one in which a young woman can maintain comfortable relationships in a variety of settings that would otherwise seem contradictory. This ability is what Latina feminist scholar and activist Gloria Anzaldúa describes as a dual, “mestiza” consciousness (AAUW, 2001).
However, not every teen girl has had a strong positive relationship with her mother. Sometimes traditional emphases or religious values can present challenges for mothers and daughters as they negotiate their relationship in an ever-changing cultural context. Indeed, previous research indicates that issues related to sexuality have often become flash points of tension between mothers and daughters, resulting in the silencing of such conversations. Indeed, research suggests that many Latina teen girls struggle with expressing their own views and feelings about topics of substance to their mothers (Taylor).

One teen expressed her conflicted relationship with her mother:

My mother and I don’t get along very well. We argue a lot. I can say something to her and she’ll try to criticize me. I don’t know why. It might be something that any other daughter would say, but she can take it so personally. Actually, I think things are better now because I’m 18. Maybe going through experiences with her, I know now that if I say something, I’m just kind of starting an argument. Then I think maybe she’ll respect me more, but I think our relationship comes from black parents. Black mothers think they are the queen—that they should have all the power. It’s like they don’t even think I’m going to respect you as an adult.

As we noted in the previous chapter, many of these issues confronting teen girls are hallmarks of adolescent development. The need to individuate yet remain close to other members of their families is the developmental feature of adolescence. However, teen girls of color and their families can benefit from external supports. Community organizations such as Family Matters and schools can provide a key role: to help teens channel these challenges into non-dangerous outcomes. Mothers need not be the sole adult attempting to guide their daughters.

Indeed, the absence of their fathers was a compelling issue in the teen girls’ lives. Their accounts are perhaps not surprising, given national data that indicates that most children whose fathers were living out of the home had limited contact with them. Specific statistics suggest that about half of these children had contact with their fathers just once a year or not at all (Cherlin, 2002). Parental conflict and pain related to separation accounted for much of the paternal absence. Many other absent fathers invested their emotional energy in new lives and families that did not involve the children left behind. However, recent research also suggests that many married fathers living in nuclear families may have related to their children only indirectly, through the child’s mother; when that partner relationship is strained or broken, absent fathers may have difficulty connecting directly with their children (Cherlin, 2002).

These data indicate that relationships between fathers and their children are multi-faceted and complex. This complexity has to be understood so that we don’t uncritically accept the pervasive myth that in families of low-income urban youth of color, particularly those who are black or Latina, fathers are virtually absent from their children’s lives. Indeed, recent research findings indicate that fathers who do not live with their teens are typically present in their daughters’ lives, if only with occasional contact (Way & Stauber, 1996).

Unlike studies of relationships between white middle class adolescents and their fathers that have been characterized as “emotionally flat” (Steinberg, 1990), current research involving low-income urban teen girls of color indicates a different relationship profile with their fathers. Most described relationships in which there was much emotion and communication, either in conflicts or in sharing thoughts and feelings (Way & Stauber, 1996). This research suggests that fathers who do not live with their daughters, as well as those who do, often play critical roles in their daughters’ lives.
One teen girl described her live-away father as a strong role model:

I want to be a doctor, like my dad, and help people. I get to see my dad sometimes and I talk to him on the phone. He says it’s good that I want to be a doctor.

Another teen appreciated her father’s support for her future dreams:

I want to be an actress. My father lives in New Jersey, which is next to New York. I see him every year. He said he’s going to take me to see what it’s like to be an actress there.

Still, some of the teen girls in our project did not have contact with their birth fathers. Several talked about ways their families dealt with conflict between their parents:

My whole family helps me a lot—my mom, my older sister, my older brother. We sometimes gather in the front room. We play cards, board games. Some nights we go to the video store and get video movies to watch. I’m close with my step-dad, too. When I was little, my real dad was around then. But he had found someone else, so he left my mom. He had a daughter—that’s my other sister. Later, I was starting to see him more. He called our school and came to see us there because my mom wouldn’t let him come to the house. She said he never was around for us to help her take care of us. Then we moved and we don’t see him anymore. I haven’t seen him for years.

My mother and my father fought a lot. He moved out when I was ten years old. He died about five years later, when I was 15. I didn’t have much of a relationship with him after my parents split up. It was hard—I had so much animosity towards him when he died. I was angry because he had all these chances. I just feel bad. He went to boot camp instead of jail and he never pulled his life together. It’s just hard to feel sad about him.

Several teens described their step-fathers as being closer to them than their own fathers:

My step-dad has been there when I was upset. One time I didn’t have a Father’s Day card to give him and he said I could make my own card and give it to him. I don’t miss my real dad because I’m close to my step-dad.

When their fathers live away from home, it is reasonable to expect that teens would take on some household responsibilities. Some teens reported that they were expected to complete simple family chores. However, others talked about being put into responsible roles that could be overwhelming:

There’s a lot of responsibility I take on because my mother doesn’t. I take care of my younger brother growing up because my mom doesn’t take care of things. It’s not like I have to baby-sit him all the time. But I have to be the one to make sure that he does the things he has to do. Like, make sure you brush your teeth. Make sure you pick up the stuff in your room. My mom lets him get away with things that I never could. It’s not because she likes him more, but because me and my brother are two years apart and she had me when she was younger.
At home, I have chores like cleaning up and doing the dishes and stuff like that around the house because my mom works nights.

Yet other teens had simpler family chores to take care of:

I don’t have a lot of responsibilities at home. I get asked once in a while to wash dishes or take out trash, but that’s usually on the weekends. I’d say that homework is the most important responsibility I have, along with the extra stuff that people ask me. I also have to remember to keep up with them.

At home, I have chores on a chart that my mom and grandma make up. Sometimes I make the chart up, too. So every time I come home I look at it to see if I have to wash the dishes or sweep the floor or vacuum the living room.

Some teens have had other family members step in to fill an absent parent’s place:

I feel safety with my grandma because she’s my guardian and she can protect me in different ways. She can stop trouble for me or just tell me to do something about it or to just walk away. Or, if there’s a situation, she’ll talk to the person who said something to me, trying to explain things, instead of having problems or more challenges.

Extended family, even at a distance, felt supportive to many of the teen girls:

I’m close to mostly all my cousins, even though they live in Mississippi. And I go to all my aunts and uncles. My grandma lives on the northwest side in Chicago. Every holiday we have like a family reunion.

Most teens also described strong ties with their brothers and sisters as well:

I talk to my older brothers and sisters a lot, and my mom and grandma. My grandma is so nice and she treats other people the way that they want to be treated. She says, “Don’t talk smart to people, because that will get something started.”

My brother has influenced me the most. He’s made a lot of mistakes in his life and he’s trying to get me to stay on the right track. He always talks to me when he makes a mistake and says that he’s sorry he did it, he wishes he would have never done it and that he hopes that I don’t make the same mistake.

I turn to my older sister for support. She helps me more than my friends can. Like the other day, I was waiting for class to start. A friend told me he liked me and he kept asking me over and over to say I liked him back. I didn’t want to do that.
And I didn’t want to ask my girlfriend how to handle this, because she probably would say, “Well, I think he’s cute.” So, later, I asked my sister what to do, because he made me so uncomfortable with all that attention. She said to ask the teacher to move our desks.

While most of the teens have had strong support from older siblings, several were also expected to be there for other family members, too:

As I get older, I have more responsibilities for getting along with my younger sisters. You know, sometimes they get on your nerves when you want to do something. Or when they play, they hit hard and I get blamed for it. Sometimes I have to sit down or take a time out. Sometimes I also get in trouble for what they do.

I help out with taking care of my little sister. When my mom’s arthritis is hurting her hand, that’s my biggest responsibility.

Throughout this project, we realized that the teen girls did, indeed, have insight into social injustices. However, we did not ask questions in our research project about how their families socialized their girls to develop such insight into social conditions that surround their lives. On the other hand, the teens spoke openly about the ways that Family Matters staff increased their awareness and skills about self-empowerment:

They made it very clear to us about choices and consequences. That really helped me out because now, before I do anything, I really think about it. Like, “Okay, these are the pros and these are the cons.” If I had asked my mom, she would have said, “No, you just don’t do that. You’re going to go to hell. You’re going to get pregnant right then and there.”

Family Matters has taught me to deal better with my home and personal issues. I’ve been here since I was six. They say that you can’t always run away from things. You have to stay and face them, otherwise you’ll just be hiding from reality and it will get worse. Like you might not see it right away, but (you) will sooner or later. I learned there are different approaches you can take to solving a problem: our whole consequence, resolution, our whole principles of leadership.
Teen Love

Teen love what does it mean? Is it a way of expressing your feelings for one another. Like a family member, but what about others. Most people say you find love at an old age. When you are mature and experienced. Although you can't find love if it's a mature and experienced. People also say you're young, mature and experienced. If you're crazy, you in the young age people would say you're young, that you don't know any better. You don't know who you are a teen it's hard. You don't know who love at a young age people. It can be difficult to know your friend or foe. It can be difficult to know who really cares or just wants some other people don't understand true love. Sometimes you do find true love. Sometimes it's the guy who you're with that doesn't love you back. Maybe he doesn't feel the same way. After a thing like that you just stop trying. Not all guys are like that. Some are different.

Dedicated to Ben ———
Activities
Talk to these teen girls and they can recite their complex weekly schedules by heart. Busy as these young women are, their intense involvement in activities varies from the statistical profile indicating that urban teen girls of color from low-income families are far less likely to participate in after-school activities than their peers (Waff, 1994).

In any given week, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays after school belong to activities at *Family Matters.* When they were not there, the teen girls said they could be found staying late at school for enrichment sessions, or attending tutoring programs, on soccer fields and basketball courts, in the library, at home doing homework, or at part-time baby-sitting jobs. On weekends, they were busy with family commitments and activities with their friends. Although every afternoon after school was accounted for, all the teens described homework as their primary responsibility.

One teen emphasized its importance in this way:

> **Homework is the most important of all this, because my teacher teaches us a lot of stuff ahead of our grade and we get a lot of homework.**

Sports figured high on the activities list for several teens as well. Besides the fun that the teens reported reaping from their team experiences, research over the past decade has also established the vital role that sports can play in the health of young teen girls. Girls who play team sports develop opportunities to compete and collaborate with others, to experience and view their bodies as competent and skilled, rather than for ornamentation or as objects of sexual attraction. Girls who participate in athletic activities also perform better academically, smoke less, consume less alcohol and drugs, and have lower school dropout rates than their non-athletic peers (Jaffe & Mahle-Lutter, 1995).

Beyond these benefits, current research conducted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) of middle school students and their changing attitudes about their athletic abilities indicates that long-lasting effects can also be attained (Anderson, 2004). As children enter early adolescence, they begin to form self-identities, seeing themselves as artistic, perhaps poetic, or strong in math. Dr. Cheryl Anderson, the lead researcher in the NIH study, maintains that these young teens also often form an “athletic identity”. “The reason people exercise over time is because they see themselves as a person who does these things—it’s part of their identity,” she says (Parker-Pope, 2004). Opportunities to play at several sports during these young teen years can form a life-long affinity for exercise, which in turn, can foster healthy adult lifestyles.

A young teen described how soccer has expanded her social relationships:

> **I love playing soccer. The school doesn’t have a soccer team, though. So I usually just play it over the summer when I go up to Wisconsin. This year is going to be my sixth year going. I go for a week, sometimes two or three. Some of my closest girlfriends I met at camp. Most of them live in Wisconsin though, or Lincoln Park, or Oak Park or Lawndale. We talk on-line. We stay in contact throughout the year, sometimes by letter or phone calls.**

Another spoke of the goals she and her teammates have set for themselves:

> **When I’m not going to Family Matters after school, I practice with my basketball team. We’re trying to make the play-offs this year.**

Beyond sports, the teens all craved and have found varied outlets for their creativity. At *Family Matters,* they have explored multiple ways to express it, such as jewelry crafting, candle making, painting and dramatics.
Most also sought individual forms of creative expression as well:

I’m just all art. I love art. I like writing poetry just to get out my feelings because I love to talk. But I usually express myself in drawings. My poetry, to me (other people might see it differently), is just like words in my head expressed on paper. I just like writing down what I’m thinking and sometimes it turns to be in a poetic way.

I’ve been playing the violin for over five years. I like it, but a few months ago, I was going to drop out because the other girls in my group kind of put me down. They can pay to take extra private lessons and so they’re ahead of me in some pieces. I went home and my friend told me to chill because there’s gonna be a lot of people that are going to be like that, for their own reasons. But I have to learn to deal with that. She kind of narrowed down the choices for me: I was going to quit something that I really loved because of some girls, or I was going to go ahead with it and try not to get into it with them.

I take my violin into the basement and play for hours at a time.

Without a doubt, we realized that these teen girls were keenly aware of the societal issues and complex challenges that surrounded them. They also reported that they valued outlets for expression and reflection:

I write in a diary. If there are things that other people are trying to do and I don’t want to talk about, I come home and write about it in my diary. I write about the day that went wrong or a person that said something and what they said about me. I also write in a journal sometimes. I let my family members look at my journal. But there’s personal stuff in my diary and I want to keep that near to myself. I have my own key and lock because sometimes people like to go through my things. So I lock it and put it in a special place.

I like to hang upside down on the monkey bars or go sit someplace high and just think.

I have a little psychology book and sometimes I write down all my theories.

I talk to people. I challenge them and then I write stuff down.

Still, several social scientists have indicated that simply learning about social oppression can be problematic for young women of poverty or color, if they cannot imagine that their oppressive conditions can be interrupted and transformed (Miller, 1998). “If young people see pervasive social inequity and its adverse consequences, but they cannot imagine transformation, such information may simply fold into a heap of hopelessness, cynicism, or alienation” (Miller, 1998). High school students of color with sophisticated social consciousness of race and
class relations may also have the most depressed sense of what is possible for themselves (Fine & Macpherson, 1995).

Recent research suggests that these young women are searching for ways to connect with other girls and women. Data indicate that girls’ and young women’s groups can provide insular “homeplaces” where young teens, hungry for spaces where they can talk, listen, enter “dressing rooms for trying on (and discarding) ways to be women” (Fine & Macpherson, 1995).

**Family Matters**

At *Family Matters*, the teen girls have found and indeed, helped to create, such a “homeplace.” As researchers, we have observed *Family Matters’* outstanding programs, dedicated administrators, uniquely talented staff and consultants, and the high level of accomplishments of its youth members. Still, we were deeply moved by the unanimously positive, enthusiastic expressions of connection from every one of the teen girls and alumnai as they described the program’s role in their lives. In the following excerpts, the teen girls expressed their deep level of comfort, of belonging at *Family Matters*. They acknowledged that the adults there provided extensions of authority and supervision, at times akin to serving in place of parents (“in loco parentis”).

Beyond that, they also described the program as like another family to them, a place to belong:

*People at Family Matters help me stay out of a lot of trouble because I probably would have been outside right now, not doing homework but since I’m in Family Matters, I do a lot. It’s like another family.*

Alumnai of *Family Matters* also fondly recalled their attachments to the program:

*I felt that the more I kept going to Family Matters, you got familiar with the people who are around there, to the point where they would be like, “Oh, she’s from around here.” I went back to Family Matters about a month ago, and I still felt the same way—I felt comfortable.*

*When I started going to Family Matters, I was the quiet rebel. I would do all my stuff outside the house, and I would be so good inside the house. I was raised on the west side. (When) I was 13, and came to the north side against my will, I didn’t make a lot of friends there. But when I joined Family Matters, it was like a family. I had a family of friends, to this day.*

Several of the teen girls spoke of the homework support that was readily available:

*Family Matters helps me a lot. I have to have help with some of my homework. Right now, my math is hard for me to do. I do it by myself, but if there’s a problem that I don’t get, then they’ll help me on it. They give me help on anything that’s going on.*

The alumnai vividly recalled the value that came from *Family Matters’* approach to sex education:
I didn’t know about anything, anything at all. I was so ignorant. I didn’t know about a lot of stuff, like, lesbians. Everybody was like, “No, you don’t wear pants. You’re a girl, you need to like skirts. I really didn’t know about sexual reproduction. What I really liked about Family Matters is that they told you the truth. If any of us were to ask our mothers, they would tell you what they wanted you to know and how they wanted you to do things. But at Family Matters, it was, “Okay, this is what it is. Here are some books and we’re going to have somebody like a doctor come in and talk to us about it.”

About twice a month, there would be some new people coming in to talk with us. Maybe somebody talking about relationships, or abuse, or sex education. So we were very much aware of what was going on.

In varied ways, Family Matters staff have modeled effective parenting and teaching methods for the teen girls. Many of these examples expanded upon those of the girls’ parents and teachers. The alumnae reflected on the benefits they saw in this approach:

My mama said I can’t do... and I can’t.... So I’d go home and she’d ask what I learned at Family Matters today. I’d say, “Nothing, Mom.” Because if I said, “We learned how to put a condom on...Well!”

I’m different—my support came first from my mother. I could come home and get all F’s and one D. She’d say, “Yay!” for that D. She’d say, “Let’s pray about it. Put it in an envelope and see if you do better next semester.” I’d go outside, and everybody would say, “Oh my God, she just flunked every class and her mom’s not attacking her.” I still get that same support today. Until you get to sex. And then, it’s like, “No, you’re gonna burn. I’m gonna beat you.”

I always had to be independent. My mom would never go up to the school or Family Matters. It was always that church was more important. So then you start to act up to get any attention. So she would say, you’re not even going to graduate from high school, so how are you going to go to college? Since I was 14, I had to buy my own clothes, buy my own shoes, buy my own school supplies. My priorities today are paying my rent and going to pharmacy school. I work at a pharmacy now. I felt like Family Matters had a big hand in raising me. Even when my mom hated that I spent more time there than at home.

My mom loved it. When she was looking for a place to stay, they helped put down the down payment. Everybody else’s parents were more involved with Family Matters than my parents were. They always talked about how your parent had to come to the parents’ meeting or else you’d be kicked out. But they never left me out. “My mom’s not going to be there,” I’d tell them. “Still come,” they’d say.
Another time we’d all be supposed to go somewhere. “My mom’s going to church,” I’d say. “Come anyway. Come with So and So and her mom.”

Family Matters also created a mentoring group for the teen girls. Its effect on some of the alumnae mirrored the outcomes of research that indicates the positive influences of such relationships: “As soon as the girls realized that someone was really listening to them, they were empowered to see themselves as people who mattered. They knew they had the chance to have a direct impact on their lives” (Waff, 1994).

Teens at Family Matters have flourished in a space that has become the kind of home that bell hooks described as “the place where young women shared secrets, connected stories, made political sense out of personal misery, and organized in resistance” to the social injustices they faced (Waff, 1994).

As recent research indicates, teen girls often seek out non-parent adults with whom to relate (Rhodes & Davis, 1996). Some choose a ‘natural mentor’ to provide emotional support. This is typically an older person from among their close circle of relationships—a grandparent, an older sister, an aunt, a favorite neighbor or teacher. In many cases, this mentor either supplements the role of the teen’s parent or compensates for an absent parent. One particular benefit that has emerged from these relationships is the knowledge and skills related to forming and sustaining relationships that the teen can acquire.

However, research data also indicate that many teen girls do not naturally form such supportive relationships on their own (Rhodes & Davis, 1996). Mentoring programs, such as the one that existed at Family Matters for a number of years, draw on volunteer mentors that are assigned to individual teen girls:

I know my mom expects more from me. But all I heard growing up in my house was, “Don’t screw up. Don’t screw up, because I’m not going to have a pregnant person. I’m a single mom and you’re not going to embarrass me that way.” But from Family Matters, you got opportunities and you got positive feedback: “You should try this over here,” and “Everything is so nice”, and “Wow, this is very well written.” So every decision I made, I did with my mentor. And now that I’ve gotten older, I do it on my own. Still, it’s always nice to call up somebody and ask if they can reread this for me.

Such mentoring programs tend to engender considerable enthusiasm, but little study has been undertaken to determine their effectiveness (Rhodes & Davis, 1996). Despite many clear successes, volunteer mentor programs are not without challenges. Among these are high termination rates, which may be partially influenced by the expectations and characteristics of the volunteers: some mentors encourage their teen partners to take an active role in determining the direction and activities of the relationship, while others may have a more adult-directed agenda. Additionally, some mentors may seem out of touch with the teen girls’ experiences and problems. Research indicates that this situation may stem from the social distance that exists between middle-class volunteers and urban adolescent girls (Balcazar & Fawcett, 1992). One suggestion from these findings is that mentors for urban adolescent girls be drawn from adults who live or work in urban communities, who are familiar with the circumstances confronting these youth. These individuals may be better able to give advice that is consistent with the cultural norms, options and constraints of a given setting.

One alumna recalled her problematic relationships with two mentors, an excerpt that echoes the challenges described in research studies:
If you didn’t have a mentor, you’d say to somebody else, could I go with your mentor? Some of them weren’t that good. Maybe they did it because it sounded nice. I had two mentors and both of them gave me some kind of dinner when they dumped me. I knew it was coming because you wouldn’t hear from them for two months and then you get a call, “Can we go to dinner?” So, I decided, I’m just going to order everything, whatever I want. It was like a boyfriend/girlfriend dump. My mentor said, “Do I look different?” I said, “I know you’re pregnant. You’ve got your own life.” Both times I got stood up like that at dinner. So I picked quesadillas and pizza, cheesecake and ice cream.

On the other hand, another alumna spoke compellingly of the enduring, significant relationship she formed with her mentor:

I still have a mentor from Family Matters. I’ve had her since I was 13. I’m going on twenty-two now. I met her when she was single. I still keep in touch with her. I went to her wedding. She’s moved and has two kids now. We’ve had a great relationship. I babysit for the kids often, and housesit and take care of her dogs. I have a room at her house.

An alternative to a volunteer mentor program suggested by current research findings is to teach adolescents techniques for recruiting support from helpful adults within their own social networks. Such research has indicated that with training and encouragement, adolescent girls might be taught ways to identify, meet and establish relationships with existing sources of support (Balcazar & Fawcett, 1992). Through these and many other ways, Family Matters has supported teen girls in their own personal growth.

One teen spoke of lessons she had learned there:

Family Matters helps me deal with my life. If I have a problem, I can come here and talk with Tawanna. She’ll help me by giving me options and talk with me about them.

Several alumnae also described how Family Matters affected their lives:

Family Matters changed my thinking from no self-esteem whatsoever to more self-esteem. I developed an ego.

Family Matters had the greatest impact in the way I interact with the world today. Before I started going there, I’d be cursing somebody out, using all the words. But Family Matters got you brainwashed. I can’t say “No”, can’t say “Won’t”. Can’t say “Ain’t”. No negative words. And always the three words: choice, consequences, positive reinforcement.
It's easier now for me to show how I feel, how to express my feelings. When I was younger, I felt that people might not want to listen to what I have to say. But now, if I have something to say, I'm going to say it.

Today, I realize I learned a lot of independence through *Family Matters*: to be myself, to be cool with who I am. And so I moved to another state to go to college now. This wouldn't have been me several years ago. Then I was still thinking that I have to be around my mom. Well, now I realize I have to do what I have to do. I've grown up a lot.

At an age when many girls find female friendships hard to come by and to sustain, *Family Matters* has encouraged teens to bond and to lead:

If you were in the leadership core, you were a part of putting that together. They would take it to the staff and they always responded right away. But if you were just in the larger SOS group, then you'd have to wait a couple of days. So you always made sure you had a friend in leadership.

I was pushy then and I'm pushy now, but I really have changed. I'm just not so aggressive now. If somebody hurts my feelings now, I'll just be like, whatever. That's because my friends told me I needed to be nicer.

We all trusted each other and we were very committed. If none of us were committed, then I don't think it would have worked.

We were moved to hear one alumna express one of the most profound effects that had endured years after her experiences at *Family Matters*:

My family, my closest relationships are right here in this room—the two best friends I've had since we grew up together at *Family Matters*. 

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Conclusions & Recommendations:
The teen girls and alumnae of *Family Matters* hold high hopes for their future. The alumnae reflected on specific goals they are setting for themselves, many of them based on their years growing up in East Rogers Park:

I want to take more risks with doing stuff by myself and not caring what the feedback is from others. Now that I’m getting older, I’m trying to turn the switch off of that extra voice, turning it back on sometimes.

I never want to live like my mom did. I’m not going to marry someone until they get a degree. If you don’t have a degree yet, then I don’t want to get married. We’re not going to live in an apartment. We’re going to have a townhouse, or a condo. I don’t want to live in an apartment all my life. I know what I want, and I know all my goals. I didn’t want to stay in a studio apartment. I had to have my one bedroom, so I have had to prioritize how to pay for that now.

Right now, I’m trying to see if I can get an apartment or if I need to stay at home. I do want more for myself. My mom has worked really hard and now she has a condo. But I want a house. I don’t want to feel like I have to wait until I get married to have one. I feel like I should be able to have one four years from now, and not have a problem with that. When I get my degree, I don’t want to be here in Chicago. Maybe I’ll want to move to California. I don’t want to push family aside, but I want to see what I want to do and what’s going to make me happy, vs. satisfying other people. I’m always very concerned about how somebody else is going to feel. A lot of people always tell me that other people don’t think that way. A lot of people think about themselves first, and then they think about other people.

When we asked these young women how they saw success, they answered in ways that were as flowing in thought as they were brimming with hope:

Success is to be able to look yourself in the mirror and just feel that I love who I am. Not everything, but about 80% of the things about me, maybe 90%. To be able to know that I am comfortable, have a job, barely afford a house, but enough to go on trips. Not to have to worry about getting bills paid, traveling and just enjoying my life. Just because I’m not riding a Benz doesn’t mean I’m not successful. Success to me is whatever I make.

Success is being able to say I’m who I am and I did the things that I did. Being able to say that I won’t have to worry about things—paying my bills or being able to put my kids through college. Being able to know that I can do it. Just living each day blessed. Happy. I see a lot of people that have gotten older and gotten so grumpy and angry. I never want to be that way. They have so much that is material, but they never have that peace to say, “I’m calm and enjoying this.” It’s not about what you’re wearing and what you’re riding in. It’s about how you feel.

It’s never been about how much money is in my bank account. It’s been about how big my heart is and how much I can wake up every day and say I love myself and I love my life. That’s all it is. Success is basically not having regrets with what you did with your life. Appreciate yourself and how you did in your life. Not to
say, “I wish I did, I wish I could, I wish I had.” When you do that, that’s when you have to get up and work to get that. So then I can teach my kids, not saying there’s only one way to get in the door. To me, there’s like, 30 ways to get in the building—you go through a window or over the roof. You can kick a wall. To be able to say that my one way in can maybe help six other people, too.

Success to me is being happy and content with everything you do. I do try to live by no regrets. If you sit there and dwell on it, you’re just not going to get out of that funk at all. I always think that bettering yourself is a good thing. Change is good. I believe success is also measured if you can make a positive impact on anybody. They’re always going to think back. I don’t see anything wrong with making money. I’m a business major. But at the same time, I never want to look back and worry, “Oh, why does he have this and I don’t?” Success is being happy and content with what you have. And if you don’t like it, do something about it. That’s what I like to live by.

After conducting this research, we too, see that these young women and teens in our project have great potential to contribute to the world in which they live. We think we might help to ensure their success by acting as a catalyst in getting their voices heard. At the beginning of this project, we asked the teen girls who they thought should hear what they were saying. They responded:

I’d like younger kids to hear what we’re saying because maybe it can inspire them to never give up.

Other teenagers should hear it too, because maybe they might want to speak what they think.

Teenagers, so if they have younger brothers or sisters, they could know how to talk with them.

I want people with kids to read this so they can understand to not underestimate their kids.

I think it even might help people in gangs, because then they would know that if I can do it, they can do it, too. As long as you put your mind to it, as long as you tell yourself that you’re capable of living up to your best potential, then that’s all that matters.

I wish the drug dealers could read this or gang members. For them to know that when they’re walking down the street, kids that are around don’t like to hear all their curse words. Probably most of them have children themselves and maybe this will help them think about them.

It would be good for the adults to hear it too, because it could get in their head and make them realize how it is in their community, and what other people think.

I’d like some people in the neighborhood to hear what I think. It might change the way they act. It would be good for teenagers to hear too, before they make a
mistake or something. Or if some people go through the same thing, it might help them. For people who think badly about our neighborhood, they should see how it’s like before they judge it, though.

Any people who live in a community like mine, but more importantly, people who don’t. It’s important to know where other people come from and to understand why people act the way they do. I want to say that a lot of time maybe white people don’t really understand.

I’d like people from outside Rogers Park to read this so they would not look down on the neighborhood. They would know that Rogers Park isn’t that bad and that Rogers Park has a lot of smart people. It’s not just for dumb people. For college students living out there in the world, it could also help them be open-minded, to know about places like this, or that these kids have situations in which they have to deal with, but they’re trying their best to make it through. To know the whole world is not like, cake and games.

For the people who think in stereotypes, reading what we think will be a shock to them. I think it will be a wake-up call. It’s not good at all to have a stereotype when you think about a person because you never really know about anyone, unless you talk with them. You never really know a situation unless you live it. There are gonna be people who have stereotypes toward others, no matter what happens. But we can help that population kind of decrease if we let them know, “I’m not what you think I am.” People in general should know what we’re saying, because everything we’re talking about can help us all as adults. Even if people are not experiencing the same things as we are, they might experience similar situations someday. Or something might come along in which it’s good to have an open mind to what is going on. As you get older and you come in contact with any of these situations we’re talking about, you’ll look back and say, this person was talking about this. Maybe I can look at this situation from that viewpoint.

I’d like leaders to read this so they know that if they’re representing Chicago, they need to know what the people of Chicago think.

The mayor should hear this too, because he should do something about the drug dealers and make the blocks safer for people to walk down.

I don’t think the chances are good of the police hearing what we say and then changing their attitudes. But I would think that older people, city officials, should know, especially what the police are doing here.

I’d like people in politics, the officials, to know because they probably could do something about it.

The other day, I saw Joe Moore. He’s like the president of the re-election. I talked with him about the drug dealers. I told him that people are scared to walk their
dog down the street in the neighborhood. I’ve seen people and they just walk real fast to pass the drug dealers. I think he listened to me. He was talking about that they were gonna try to make a change and all that.

I think people in power in Chicago look at the condos situation as though it was black and white. It’s not always black and white—there’s always a gray area. There’s always something in between that can work. If you don’t think there’s only one way, you can find something in between the two sides to help you out of a hard situation. Anything you talk about might benefit anybody or even everybody in some ways.

As we looked back at the many themes embedded in the teen girls’ narratives, there are a few central conclusions that we came to. What we write here are not particular concerns but rather, what struck us, leaving lasting impressions. It is the implications of these issues for social policy reform that we raise for discussion. Our interpretations which follow, also have led us to consider what other issues need to be addressed in future studies.

We saw paradoxical perspectives emerge as the teens talked about their community—their own perspectives and how they thought others might view the neighborhood too. Their narratives were often layered with ambivalence, complexities and contradictions: the teens recognized dangers in their neighborhood, yet they also voiced a strong sense of pride as well—this is my community. This inner conflict may well be related to their adolescent developmental need to feel safe and protected in their own environment, despite its real threats. This may also be a natural defensive posture as a response to verbal attacks from peers outside their neighborhood.

When the teens described more general impressions of their neighborhood, they spoke proudly of the diversity that surrounded them. In their view, cultural and racial differences offered great opportunities. They also were smart about how to deal with challenges in their community. Many times, they seemed poised on the cusp of potential activism, such as the actions suggested by Julie Hamos, the Illinois Legislative Representative, 19th District, which includes Rogers Park:

I would encourage young people to get involved in any issue that matters to them—whatever makes their heart beat faster and gets them excited. Really look outside at the world around them and see what they would like to change. Then come together to figure out how to have a collective voice in the matter. Reach out to their government officials and look to them to help get the job done. Family Matters is a beautiful organization that can really help them do that. It’s exactly organizations like that that can help young people mobilize for action. I believe it really is what changes the world.

It is hurtful when the teens carry with them stereotypic, negative images they have heard about their neighborhood. Yet they have also drawn upon a powerful antidote to deflect those limited points of view. Indeed, we have come away from this study with a renewed respect for the power of integrating diversity: race, gender, ethnicity and classes. It is compelling to contemplate the power of its effects were it to be fully infused in our own lives and in our children’s lives.

We saw that the teen girls viewed sexual harassment, both verbal and physical, on the street as normal, everyday interactions. Unlike the teens’ reactions which were mostly limited to frustration and annoyance, we are deeply concerned that these behaviors are incredibly problematic and dangerous. Since public sexual harassment by adult males is such a highly visible part of the landscape of daily life in the teens’ neighborhood, we recommend that the community take immediate action. It is essential that adults respond to the teens’ concerns, work more closely with area police, so that they all can support these teens’ safety, along with their healthy growth and development.

Many of the teens’ families, friends and neighbors have been displaced, sometimes more than once, while they search unsuccessfully to find a new way to stay in their rapidly changing community. As the face of the neighborhood changes along with the faces in it, it is the low-income individuals and families that are extremely limited in their ability to maintain the stable community they had created.

Yet we also see that this transitional moment can create an opportunity for intentional change. These families are not alone in their struggle. Indeed, the strong history of Rogers Park is once again surfacing.
Community organizations are mobilizing in resistance to changes that are threatening the economically and ethnically diverse community. But change does not necessarily come easily, and collaborating with community partners can be a complex undertaking. For instance, Michael Glasser, President of the Rogers Park Builders Group and Magellan Properties, articulates his ambivalence when it comes to creating positive social change in this community:

I've thought how cool it would be if I could get people in the Builders Group to hire these kids. I've had some discussion but people are running businesses. There are some pretty charitable, pretty giving people with time and money in the Builders Group, but to create the kind of opportunity and situation where they would actually want to reach out and tutor and mentor teens would be a huge undertaking. We're all so busy in our daily life. But that's the kind of thing where action can support talk.

Although we appreciate the challenges that Michael Glasser wrestles with, we do encourage him to follow through with what he knows can make a real difference in the lives of teens and their families in East Rogers Park.

When something goes wrong in young teens’ lives, it seems likely that many adults tend to blame the teens themselves. Yet what we saw throughout this project was that these teen girls are smart, committed and hard-working. We also saw that there is a real risk of their losing that focus in the absence of institutional support. If we expect the teens to sustain the positive initiative that we saw in their early adolescence, external supports need to be in place. Adults need to hear what the teens have to say, to validate their perspectives. Schools, community organizations and broader neighborhood efforts play crucial roles in supporting their teens as they attempt to turn risks and challenges into strengths and resiliencies. Indeed, Rudy Lubov, Principal of Gale Elementary Community Academy, spoke strongly in a similar vein:

I’m very committed to getting Gale School and all our students out into the larger community and to bringing the larger community into Gale. In that way, we can break down that sense of isolation that is expressed in what the teens are saying and the image that they’re reflecting, whether it’s a self image or a community wide perception. I’m all about changing the perception and the actual reality so that it becomes a better place, so that it’s perceived as a better place and in fact it will be better for the people that live here.

Female friendships were complex and troubling to many of the teen girls. Yet the young teens and adult alumnae all clearly cherished strong bonds between themselves and close female friends. We recognize a need for further exploration about what same-sex friendship entails. The young teens seemed unaware of the implicit gendered competition of the “second sex” vying for the “prize catch” of a male that underlined frequent squabbles over make-up, attractiveness and ability to get and hold onto a boyfriend.

The teens spoke positively about their friendships with males. Yet we also saw that they were reverting to traditional female socialization patterns when choosing boyfriends. The teen girls very much wanted to participate in dating and romance. In personal writings, some of them shared with us that they characterized themselves as caretakers of budding relationships, constantly critiquing conversations. They frequently monitored the emotional temperature of their “couple-hood”, and hovered over what they saw as vulnerabilities in a male who was emotionally distant. One said that only she could see her guy as being in pain, wounded by past hurts that remained unspoken. They took pride in being the only ones who might get to know someone they saw as, in one teen’s words, “a misunderstood person, who needs love and comfort.”

These traditional, submissive patterns are particularly concerning in light of the teen girls’ descriptions of experiences and expressed views about dating older men. We were quite troubled about their interest in older men as potential partners, as well as their lack of information about related emotional and legal issues. It is important for all adults that read this to know what is going on in the lives of some girls. While we recognized that asserting their independence makes these adolescents feel mature, we were also concerned that adults involved with teens need to help them find other, safer ways to express their individuality. Hearing these teen girls describe their experiences and express their views about dating older men left us quite concerned. We realized that this is a vulnerability that has not been adequately addressed by adults working with young teen girls. General ignorance of the laws concerning statutory rape is only one part of the picture that, for lack of adult attention, has become distorted. It is essential that we adults recognize the risks these uninformed teens are exposed to. They are unaware of the dangers of adult sexual predators
preying on pre-teens. There is an urgent need for the community to hold such men accountable for their deviant, illegal behavior. Young teens must be educated about ways to identify sexual predators, report them to responsible, responsive adults, and learn to view adherence to the laws about statutory rape as part of their own self-protection. At the same time, we must communicate these important messages in a way that respects their adolescent developmental task at hand: asserting their independence and craving the feelings of being grown-up.

We live in a culture in which the nuclear family model continues to be upheld as the “best” kind of family. This privileging of one family type has a negative impact on all other family types in that it makes them look deficient and even deviant. Our work with these teens debunks the myth of the pathological single parent family headed by a woman that is so perpetuated in our culture and in our social science research. These girls’ descriptions of their families broke the stereotypes. Although the families were by no means perfect, the girls’ descriptions were characterized by love, support and commitment. The teens also described their mothers’ involvement in their lives, which we saw as attempting to prepare their daughters for success in a world that they know will present many challenges. Moreover, we were impressed with the active presence of positive male figures even in the absence of live-in biological fathers.

We saw and heard many examples of the general need of every family to have multiple external supports. Parents of teens need to be included in their youths’ lives outside the home; many times their own needs require attention as well.

At an age when many girls find female friendships hard to come by and to sustain, Family Matters has encouraged teens to bond and to lead. Indeed, as alumnae reflected on the positive messages that they took away from growing up in East Rogers Park, they all identified Family Matters as what influenced them most. We recognized the remarkably powerful positive role Family Matters has played in the lives of these teens and young women. Indeed, we hope that funds can be found to maintain and expand programs and services such as theirs to young teens wherever their neighborhoods are.

Steve Serikaku, Assistant Principal of Sullivan High School, also expressed a willingness to help teens seek any needed support:

I would say to teens that they don’t have to go through the tough things alone. I think the kids get into trouble when they try to handle things on their own. We have counselors here, we have a social worker. Rogers Park has a lot of social agencies, so if there are things that we can’t handle, we can usually find someone to refer the kid to. I wish there were more Family Matters.

The impact of racism and poverty are two topics that we want to talk about with more focus in future research conducted with the families of these teen girls. In our interviews with the teen girls, we asked them if they had experienced racism. The teens did not identify any racism connected with larger societal or cultural issues in their community. Only one teen related a personal incident, apparently race-related, that happened far away from East Rogers Park. However, we think that if we asked them questions in a more focused way they would be able to identify the ways in which racism has/had not shaped their life experiences.

Additionally, although many statistics indicate that households with children headed by single mothers often are economically poor, this is an area that we did not explore in depth with the teen girls. In our interviews, we asked if money were a problem in their families. None of them identified particular troubles as they directly answered that question. However, in later answers, the teens indicated that they were keenly aware of the financial limitations they, their families and friends faced in trying to find and keep affordable housing. And so, we recognize that this is an area that could be explored in greater detail with the mothers of the teen girls in a future research project.
OPEN YOUR EYES

Open your eyes to the sounds of the world.

Open your eyes to all the cries that they’ve heard.

Open your eyes to the hope that we have, and open your eyes and realize it’s good to be glad.

I opened my eyes to the love and the joy, I opened my eyes to the world as a whole.

Just look around and think for me, because you know, our world is not what it appears to be.
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