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## Lynnwood-based Project Girl on a mission to mentor young women of color

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A group of Project Girl mentees gather for a photo. (All photos courtesy of Project Girl MentoringProgram).

According to the **Education Trust**, (<https://edtrust.org/>) "Black girls face some of the greatest barriers to educational opportunities because of racial and gender biases embedded within school discipline policies, dress code and codes of conduct that target their cultural identity." Lynnwood-based **Project Girl Mentoring Program** (<https://www.project-girl.com/>) (PGMP) is committed to addressing that bias. Since 2012, the organization has made it their mission and purpose to ensure that girls of color, ages 11-18, get the same opportunities as their white adolescent counterparts.

Since 2012, Project Girl Founder and Director Olympia Edwards has provided education, counseling and leadership to over 1,000 mentees in communities across Snohomish and King counties. Relying on grants, fundraisers and volunteers, Project Girl offers these services free to mentees, regardless of their family's economic status.



Olympia Edwards

"Before the pandemic, our program was heavily involved in five or six middle schools as well as community centers – but after COVID, we had to change our mindset and realize that not being able to go into the schools should not stop our mission." Edwards said.



Now, Project Girl hosts its mentees at a brick-and-mortar location, where the young teens can continue to benefit from learning self-empowerment, making informed decisions and establishing healthy relationships.



Mentees gather for a lesson.

"It was important for me to have a space for the kids because being able to provide that safe haven is allowing the girls to connect with us, and we are actually able to do much more for them," Edwards said.

Project Girl has a four-week, curriculum-based Immersion Lab Program that teaches confidence and life skills that make a positive impact on health and wellness. It also offers a six-month Level-Up Leadership Ambassador Program, where mentees prepare for life after high school by taking on leadership positions that help them to become ethical leaders.

Edwards, who worked in youth crisis and teen centers before founding Project Girl, said the majority of kids she worked with in those centers all had the same concerns and anxieties. "They wanted somebody to see them," she said. "They wanted somebody to hear them. They wanted somebody to be there."

It was those stories and direct connection with youth that gave Edwards the motivation to establish Project Girl. "I remember how it was to grow up in a community where you wished someone would create something for you and invest in you." She added. You wished you were seen by someone."

During the pandemic, she said, mentees faced a range of challenges behind closed doors – eating disorders, mental health issues and isolation. Project Girl responded with an emphasis on positive well-being and overall self-care.

For example, the mentees had an opportunity to make their own lavender-scented aromatherapy spray because Edwards — a firm believer in holistic health — explained, "when they are in their own spaces without a mentor or parent and get negative thoughts, they can use their aromatherapy and realize how it can positively reset their bodies."

Counseling is a key component of Project Girl's programs. "We've tapped into a counselor who also works within the (Edmonds) School District and is able to come and check in on the mentees regularly," Edwards said.

Even though Project Girl has been around for nine years, Edward admits that people are just now starting to take notice, and she gives credit to her team for their commitment, "I'm excited that two of our mentees are now part of the PMGP family and are giving back – it makes it full circle which is how it should be."

Lanessa Cerrillo

Program Director Lanessa Cerrillo was one of the first Project Girl mentees. "Transitioning from a mentee to a mentor has been an awakening experience," said Cerrillo, a University of Washington graduate. "PGMP has been my home for many years and it's such a blessing to be able to provide that for a generation of young girls of color."



Samaria Fountain, also a Project Girl alumni, is a program coordinator, and is also studying to become a certified doula. Another program coordinator, Tiana Smith, is also a recent UW graduate.

Edwards is optimistic about the future for Project Girl and envisions growth in all directions, "We'll have more space and more programming for the mentees – and maybe one day we're have our own school where the mentees can come and use our principles on an academic level," she said.

While Project Girl is primarily for girls of color, Edwards explained that the organization does not turn anyone away.

"If a young woman feels she would like to come to our program, she can," she said. "I leave it open, but they should keep in mind that I can only come from my lens, and my lens is operating as a Black woman."

Saying no to a young white woman, Edwards added, would make her feel the way society has made people of color feel – isolated. "My job is to uplift young women," Edwards added.

Cerrillo fondly recalls one Project Girl adventure that she experienced as a mentee.

"One summer day, Olympia gathered myself and the other mentees and took us to the beach. While there, we laughed, played in the water and had an impromptu photo shoot," she said. "I still remember how loved and empowered I felt that day. To be surrounded by Black and brown joy was such a gift that I'll never forget."

Project Girl's website features a quote by poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou that summarizes the group's dedication and determination for helping mentees achieve physical, financial and mental well-being:

"In order to be a mentor, and an effective one, one must care. You must care. You don't have to know how many square miles are in Idaho, you don't need to know the chemical make-up of chemistry, or blood, or water. Know what you know and care about the person, care about what you know and care about the person you are sharing with...a mentor helps the person interpret the world."

— By Misha Carter

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