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FINAL ACTION PLAN PROGRESS REPORT

My hope for this Action Plan was to create a local chapter of the national organization, I AM THAT GIRL, in my high school. This organization’s mission is “to inspire girls to love, express, and be who they are” (THAT GIRL, 2015). It teaches girls to love who they are instead of focusing on what they are not, and it creates a safe space where girls can talk openly and share their thoughts and feelings. IATG strives to change the cultures at high schools and colleges by encouraging females to support fellow females, instead of knocking them down. It also tries to empower girls in their relationships with guys as well.

I decided on this project because there is a lot of bullying at my high school. No matter how many times the administration brings in a guest speaker to talk to the students about bullying, a toxic environment persists. During my sophomore year several girls cyberbullied me by tweeting things such as, “you are the lowest of the low” and “you are a spoiled b***h.” It went on for quite a while and caused me tremendous anxiety and emotional pain. I truly doubted my self-worth and dreaded going to school. I couldn’t stand the whispers, stares, and rolled-eyes as I went about my day. I looked around and realized that I was not the only one affected. There were other students, both male and female, who were picked on and demeaned. I wondered how I could change the noxious atmosphere at my high school.

What I have realized from carrying out this project is that every student in high school struggles with self-esteem issues, including the victims and the victimizers. In fact, the core reason why bullies bully is because they themselves feel inadequate and try to fit in by joining groups that put down others. I would guess that most bullies would not be proud of their actions if they were called to task, yet the act of bullying makes them feel good about themselves. I realized that IATG is not just an organization for girl victims, rather it is for ALL girls because all girls face the same internal threats to their self-worth. They just deal with their feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt differently.

The first step in my Action Plan was obtaining approval to create a local chapter in Tiffin, Ohio from the IATG national organization. I submitted an application and was interviewed by a representative via telephone. After gaining
approval, I approached the principal of my high school about welcoming this organization of acceptance and strength. I was nervous because I live in a very rural town in Ohio, surrounded by 25 miles of cornfields. Never had there been any type of feminist support group before. I was afraid that my peers would cast me as a radical man-hating person and that I would lose my friends and start senior year off on terrible footing. But my fears were allayed by the new courage I had acquired from my “sisters” from “Women in Leadership” at Brown University, who both motivated and inspired me to take this leap of faith.

Surprisingly, the principal was very interested in the idea. He stated that I would need the approval of the city School Board to get recognized as a student organization. He also said that I would need a teacher who would serve as advisor for the group. The School Board approved my written request. I approached several teachers with my Action Plan and all three volunteered. There was even a retired teacher who came to every session! What was interesting as I took all these steps was that I became more and more comfortable articulating the Action Plan to others and persuading them of its significance.

Twelve girls, including me, attended the first meeting with two of our teacher advisors. It felt awkward initially being the leader of this group because I am not a trained counselor or therapist and I wondered what skills I could bring to the table. However, the girls were so receptive each week to the topics I presented that free flowing discussion was the norm. As time went on, I found improved confidence in my own leadership skills that would last for the rest of my life. Some of the skills I developed were: using my intuition to ask good questions, paraphrasing responses to make sure I understood, and listening well.

Each successive week, more and more girls were curious about this organization and our attendance rose. (My mother, who initially supplied refreshments before we created a system, was shocked at how much food she had to buy from week to week in the first two months.) After two months we were up to thirty girls. I was amazed that this unmet need at our high school was so substantial. I was also becoming increasingly more confident at leading a meeting. I learned to set an agenda, to keep the discussion on track, to manage the time, and to close the meeting with “next steps.”

I explicitly wrote in my Action Plan that I wanted to “increase high school girls’ confidence and sisterhood.” I knew that I could not create a legitimate and
credible data tool to calculate if this first year of being a local chapter actually did increase the self-confidence of my fellow peers, but I can say from experience at these meetings that our relationships with each other grew with each week’s meetings. We were able to be open and vulnerable, talking about things that normally go unsaid. We got many of our topics from IATG. Topics included issues such as relationships with parents, the pressure of relationships, confidence, gratitude, advertisements and media, and future goals. One of the biggest challenges for me was to learn how to deal with emotional vulnerability. Each week, one or two of us inevitably cried and sometimes the issue was something that no one had any real control over, e.g. finding a new home for an AFS student after she got kicked out of her house. I had to learn that I could not “save” everyone. This is an ongoing lesson that I have to learn.

When I came up with this Action Plan, I knew officially that it was part of IATG. But, I had no real idea of how it would play out in my high school. IATG welcomed so many amazing, kind, and strong people into my life, many of whom I had never spoken to before. These girls have motivated me and challenged me to be a better person. The social dynamic at my high school is changing gradually. IATG, while not “cool,” is intriguing to people and is an accepted component in our high school. The girls who attend have found strength in numbers and feel freer to be themselves. People in our town have also taken notice. The Tiffin Community Foundation, our local charitable organization, awarded me a scholarship for combatting bullying in the schools, and I also won first prize in a Rotary Club speech contest in which I discussed my efforts to build a greater sense of community through IATG. Townspeople from the Rotary Club came up to me afterwards telling me how much they enjoyed the speech and also offered meeting place at our local YMCA. The national IATG organization even featured me in a video on their website where I talked about how much I loved being a part of this global community.

Eventually, our mutual comfort and trust in each other led to our chapter’s agreeing to allow anyone to attend our meetings – guys, in other words. This was a huge step for us. We wanted to be inclusive, but we feared that the safe atmosphere we had established might vanish. Yet, we pushed for true inclusivity because we knew that the guys could benefit from these discussions as much as we could. Camellia Khalvati, the local chapter manager of IATG, met with us a few weeks before our inclusive opening via FaceTime to help us prepare for this next big step. It was very helpful getting her perspective and input. Our first
meeting included around ten guys from each of our four grades. Some were just interested and wanting to know what it was and others were completely immersed and motivated in this social mission. It was a change for our group’s dynamic, but eventually every member realized to trust in each other. A new challenge for me was creating topics that would be interesting to both girls and guys.

At our last meeting in May, we had over fifty people in attendance. It was a very emotional moment for me because I was graduating and I could see the culmination of all my work. I created a succession plan so that the organization would continue. There is a designated senior to lead the group next year and a designated junior to lead the following year. At the end of the school year I was very proud to present our group, together with a representative from each class, at our school’s activities fair. Thirty more upcoming freshmen signed up eagerly. We grew in number and we grew in heart and strength.

Through this experience I have learned to be comfortable with discomfort, not fearing it so much. In other words, taking action and leading even when I felt anxious. I also learned what it takes to initiate a community project, especially all the channels one must cover.

There are four pieces of advice I would give to someone who is planning an Action Plan: 1) If you have an issue or topic that you want to work on, or a problem that you want to fix, go for it. No matter how big of an issue it is in our society. 2.) Once you have your “big dream/goal,” you can then find something that would relate to this topic and your nearby community. Be creative! 3.) Once you have your topic for your Action Plan, create small goals and steps you wish to complete that will then ultimately lead to your desired goal. 4.) Don’t be afraid to ask adults for help. 5.) Be confident, no matter when the process gets challenging and tricky. If you have passion for it and others see that, you can achieve it.

It is really a life-changing experience. I wish you the best of luck.