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Media, music and society all have influences – some positive and some negative — on a teen girl's life.

A local program aims to have girls finish with a better sense of worth and direction while becoming role models to others in the community.



Local teens apply make-up for a B.A.B.Y. fashion show at Northgate Mall, front to back, Ci'deadra Dean, Shar'Nae Jackson, and Jasmine Walker. (Staff photo by Sharif Ruebin)

Sharon Decoster is the founder of Building A Better You or B.A.B.Y., a faith-based program started in 2003. B.A.B.Y. functions as a personal life skills development and fashion program for girls ages 10 to 18.

B.A.B.Y. was originally located on Parrish Street but due to growth, the program was relocated to Northgate mall.

Decoster said the location change helps contribute to B.A.B.Y.'s contemporary approach used in building self-esteem and confidence.

She used to be a modeling agency and promotions director, which gave her the idea for B.A.B.Y.

"I would go into schools across North Carolina and recruit talent but discovered it was a greater need to focus on building self-esteem and having a positive self-image with our young people," said Decoster.

Originally from Stamford, Conn., Decoster also worked as an intake counselor at a non-profit organization in Durham where the program was first implemented. In that job she worked directly with juvenile court counselors, officers, parents, schools and other agencies that would make referrals to B.A.B.Y.

B.A.B.Y. participants come from many walks of life such as having run-ins with the justice system in the past.

B.A.B.Y.'s sessions rotate in Durham and Wake Counties and meet on weekdays and weekends. The current session consists of 10 girls but has served countless more over previous years.

Decoster explained that the goal of B.A.B.Y. is for teens to find inner-self and to cultivate self-esteem. It uses fashion modeling to help teach teens about respecting themselves.

"I want her to tap into her true beauty and definitely not according to what someone else defines as beauty," she said. "I want the girls to embrace the skin they are in and to always dress as if they respect their bodies."

Decoster added that the girls discover that "it's OK to be smart and to put God first" because any decision they make impacts their lives.

B.A.B.Y. also has inspirational workshops that primarily focus on adolescent females. The workshops are about life skills, personal development, fashion and modeling.

Participants can choose from a variety of topics ranging from peer pressure, character building, conflict resolution and financial literacy along with fashion and modeling.

Most girls who go through B.A.B.Y. are still in middle and high school and currently participate in community activities. Other girls who participated in B.A.B.Y. have gone on to graduate from college.

Decoster also employs some of the girls at her office occasionally and also helps them find employment in the community. Some participants come back and do sessions for new girls.

Alexis Green, 15, participated in B.A.B.Y. and graduated in 2008. She still participates in the program's fashion shows and also helps to spread the word.

Green said that B.A.B.Y. helped her to "step out the box" and to express who she is.



At a B.A.B.Y. hair session, teens learn some of the do's and don'ts of hair care. Fashion and respecting one's body are key lessons taught during the program. (Staff photo by Sharif Ruebin)

"I gained a lot of my self-esteem back and even made new friends along the way," said Green. "Also I learned how to control my anger and to be proactive, not reactive."

"I even got new fashion tips to help me out when I need it," she said.

Green said that she became more confident because of B.A.B.Y. and that she recommends it to other young ladies.

“Not only do you participate in fashion shows and photo shoots, but you also create a bond with your mentors and others in the program,” she said.

“You become like a family and you can talk about anything if you just have to get something off your chest,” Green added.

In the family setting of B.A.B.Y., Decoster can be viewed as a mother figure.

“It is very uplifting for me to see how they mature over the years and have become more responsible, productive and focus-driven young ladies,” said Decoster.

As a model, Decoster did print work for Ebony, Dudley’s, Bronner Brothers, Bovanti’s Cosmetics and Hype Hair magazine to name a few.

“I modeled for 10 years and experienced how it helped to build my esteem, posture, poise and confidence as a young woman,” said Decoster about her own past that helped to build B.A.B.Y.

Decoster said when she was growing up, her mom used to work for the Board of Education and would take her to after school programs and summer camps. This in turn had an effect on her wanting to help females to focus on reaching personal goals – even as teenagers.

For Decoster B.A.B.Y. is all about one thing.

“It’s about helping girls to know who they are and what they’re made of,” she said. “Not because I say so but because she believes it herself.”

Teens can get involved by contacting the office at (919) 633-0897 or visit their website at www.buildingabetteryou2.com. They can also stop by the office located in Northgate Mall’s main level at Entrance 3.