

The Clayton Tribune

Georgia girl talks the talk

By Jeremy Styron News Editor

Feeling isolated in the school cafeteria? Have you been blown off by the "in-crowd?"

You are not alone.

This is the essential message of Atlanta-based Girl Talk, a student-to-student mentoring program for middle school girls that, in only four years, has rocketed to national recognition.

"I think the first thing that you should know is that I founded it at 15 years old, just based on my own middle school experience, just little things, not sitting at the lunch table or not being invited to the birthday party," said Girl Talk executive director Haley Kilpatrick of Albany.

Kilpatrick, now a junior communications major at Kennesaw State University and the granddaughter of Carolyn Martin of Tiger, once was frustrated with the social rigors of being a teenager.

"I did some research, and I came to the conclusion that I wasn't the only one who didn't have a seat at the birthday table," she said.

While a student at Deerfield-Windsor School in Albany, Kilpatrick approached the headmaster with an idea for starting a mentoring program at the school. She was initially met with doubt. School administrators feared such a program would quickly just turn to gossip.

Not so, Kilpatrick told them.

"To ensure that it doesn't become a gossip session, no names are to mentioned during Girl Talk, and there will always be a faculty member present," she said.

During the ensuing months, Kilpatrick, with the help of other volunteers, formed the organization that today spans 21 states, with one chapter each in the Virgin Islands, Canada and Africa.

"By 2010, (we want to be in) all 50 states, that's what we're aiming for," said 18-year-old Mary Catherine Kinney, who won the 2005 National Girl Talk Leader of the Year award.

During weekly meetings, Girl Talk middle schoolers meet with high schoolers to discuss life lessons and common teenage concerns. Middle schoolers are encouraged to share problems and uplifting news to the group.

Each Girl Talk chapter is dubbed either as traditional or nontraditional. Traditional chapters meet before or after school, while nontraditional groups are not affiliated with a school body but can be a sports team, a church youth group or simply a group of friends.

The program is not just spider-webbing its way quickly across the country. On Nov. 24, Kilpatrick appeared on "The Montel Williams Show" with five other women to be honored for her work in the organization. For being selected, each nonprofit president received \$20,000 for their respected groups.

"You're talking about somebody that doesn't know anything about all this," Martin said. "She said, 'Memaw, I'm going to be on "The Montel Williams Show,'" and I said, 'Who's that?' When you live in Tiger, Georgia, you don't hear about all that."

Kilpatrick said she was humbled to get to speak with Williams, who after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1999 created The Montel Williams MS Foundation. It works to drum up financial assistance to find a cure and raise awareness of the disease.

"He was very genuine, and he radiated a passion for his cause," Kilpatrick said of Williams.

Because of Girl Talk's ever-growing popularity, Martin finds it hard to nudge in granddaughter and Memaw time.

"It has been rare because of all her work, but she was here a couple months ago, and we talk on the phone," Martin said of periodic visits with Kilpatrick.

It's "just hard to get her when, you know, when they get to be the jet set," Martin continued. "She flies all over to make presentations, and then she models. But she's a bonafide granddaughter."

For girls at Rabun County Middle School who may be struggling with some of the same issues she did, Kilpatrick has a message.

"I would tell them that they're never too young to make a difference, and that all they need to do is to look at me," Kilpatrick said. "I'm a simple girl, and I had a simple idea how to make a difference in my community.

"I realized that change starts now. That not to wait, to start now."

For more information on the organization, visit www.desiretoinspire.org. Information on how to start a Girl Talk chapter is also located on the site.

