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HOME/NEWS

Young professionals Girls Inc. Jacksonville group: 'We inspire girls to be independent'

By **Beth Reese** Mon, Feb 17, 2014 @ 9:16 pm | updated Tue, Feb 18, 2014 @ 1:18 am

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Bob Self/The Times-Union
Alexandria Hill, a board member with Girls Inc. talks with Gabriela Cutrone, 9, at Arlington Heights Elementary School. Hill said she likes to be able to help girls become independent and self-confident.

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Bob Self/The Times-Union
Girls Inc. volunteer Amanda Blocker looks over the shoulder of Alani Lanier, 5 as she makes Valentine's Day cards at the Girls Inc. after school program at Arlington Heights Elementary School.

Even as a child, Alexandria Hill strove to be independent.

Her mother was frustrated at being tied to home and hearth and encouraged her daughter to want more for herself.

"My mom is not a college graduate and for many years she felt trapped in her own home. She always wanted to do more, but was never able to," Hill said. "I was determined not to grow up to be trapped in my own home, so I set my goals to make sure that I could stand on my own two feet."

As an adult, she helps young girls do the same as

GIRLS INC. JACKSONVILLE

The nonprofit's next event is the annual Daddy-Daughter Dance 5:30-9:30 p.m. March 22 at the Hyatt Regency Jacksonville Riverfront, 225 E. Coastline Drive. The cost is \$85 for one father and daughter. To purchase tickets, donate or volunteer for activities or get more information about Girls Inc., call (904) 731-9933, visit the nonprofit's office at 1627 Rogero Road or go to www.girlsincjax.org.

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a volunteer and board member of Girls Inc. Jacksonville, which offers mentoring, after-school, literacy, summer and outreach programs to elementary school-age girls. She helped found and leads the nonprofit's young professionals division, called G.I.R.L.S., or Girls Inc. Rising Leaders Society.

"For me, Girls Inc. really hits home," Hill said. "We inspire girls to be independent. We ensure that the girls will never feel trapped or lost in what is still a very male-driven society."

Hill, 29, is an attorney at the Jacksonville office of the GrayRobinson law firm. Two years ago she was recruited to be a Girls Inc. volunteer by her mentor, Jill Bechtold, an attorney for the Jacksonville-based Marks Gray firm and president of the nonprofit's board of directors. Later, Girls Inc.'s then-CEO Beth Clark asked her to consider being a board member.

"I was actually hesitant at first, as I was not sure what I could offer," Hill said. "I decided to take the leap and I am very thankful that I did."

She and Bechtold launched the young professionals division, which raises public awareness of Girls Inc., plans fundraisers and works with girls at the nonprofit's literacy and outreach sites. Also, they network and inspire each other to embody the Girls Inc. goal for its young members — being strong, smart and bold.

"I am not well-connected yet in the community ... I do, however, know a lot of young professionals," Hill said. "While the group may not be the elite of Jacksonville, they are certainly on their way and are not afraid to step in and get their hands dirty."

The group has about 50 members. The term "young professional" is applied loosely.

"Our bylaws define 'young' as under 40, but we have taken the stance that the young at heart are also welcomed," she said.

Also, the group includes lawyers, bankers and account executives, as well as University of North Florida students, and is open to men.

"The idea is to continue the Girls Inc. mission," Hill said.

Recently she and other group members visited the Girls Inc. after-school program at Arlington Heights Elementary School and helped students make Valentine's Day cards for soldiers.

"They made us bows," said a clearly impressed Tanasia Mitchell, 11.

And they talked to them, asked about their lives and showed they cared.

"It was fun. They were nice," said Antonia Pinder, 9.

Gabriela Cutrone, 9, said she hopes the older girls come back.

"That would be cool," she said. "It was amazing."

Peg Ganger, executive director of Girls Inc. Jacksonville since October, said Hill "took on the responsibility of getting this group organized and has done an amazing job."

"Having an enthusiastic and engaged young professionals group is proving to be an incredible asset to Girls Inc. With their help, we are introducing a series of new fundraising events that they are supporting," she said.

"Our young professionals are really involved ... Their hands-on involvement provides our girls with wonderful role models and the events they plan and fund make our girls feel special," Ganger said. "It's a real blessing to have them on board."

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