

THE CHANDLER REPUBLIC

June 6, 2008

Page 6

Camp empowers, builds self-esteem for girls

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THE REPUBLIC | AZCENTRAL.COM

It didn't seem Laurie Sliva was someone people would have worried about when she was a teenager.

She had a happy childhood, growing up in a loving, supportive home. She did well in school and was involved in activities.



Laurie Sliva

But in middle school she developed an eating disorder and started a six-year battle with bulimia.

Her own struggles, which she eventually overcame, led her to want to help others.

She got degrees in counseling and psychology and focused on youth development. Now she's putting the topic of an honors thesis she wrote 10 years ago at the University of Arizona into action with a summer camp for girls called BRIDGES (Building Relationships Involving the Development of Girls Empowering Selves).

"It would have appeared that I was not at risk, but it's my belief that all youth are at risk," Sliva said. "Out of my

BRIDGES summer camp for girls

What: Summer camp for girls designed to help build self-esteem and leadership skills.

Where: Weeklong sessions take place at Northern Arizona University. Campers will live in a residence hall on the Flagstaff campus.

When: The session for high school girls (grades 9-12 and recent graduates) takes place June 22-28. The session for middle school girls (grades 6-9) takes place July 20-26.

Cost: Tuition is \$1,325 but various discounts are available.

Information: www.bridgescamp.com or 480-361-8000.

desire to be accepted, like we all want, I developed an eating disorder."

In the 10 years since college Sliva, 32, has worked in the field of child development. She had the opportunity to visit schools all over the country. She set up mentoring, leadership and peer media-

“I was really struck by the pain that women and girls deal with. I saw so many of all different ages that didn't feel good about themselves.”

Laurie Sliva

Developer of BRIDGES program for girls

tion programs and kept seeing a recurring theme.

"I was really struck by the pain that women and girls deal with," said Sliva, who lives in Chandler with her husband and son. "I saw so many women of all different ages that didn't feel good about themselves. They deal with body image issues or eating issues or just some degree of self-loathing. I wanted to do something about it and was passionate about making it happen. That's where the concept of BRIDGES came from."

The camp is designed to help empower girls and build self-esteem. There are two weeklong sessions — one for high school girls in June and another for middle/junior high school girls in July.

Each day of the camp has a different theme, based on the BRIDGES acronym. The themes are: beauty, respect and relationships, individuality, dignity, goals, empowerment and selflessness.

Campers will take part in interactive large and small group activities designed to reinforce the camp's themes. There are also daily fitness classes, self-defense courses and S.H.A.R.P. (Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention) training.

This summer will be the first year for the camp, but Sliva said girls from throughout the country have registered for the sessions to be held at Northern Arizona University.

She said it wasn't easy taking the camp from concept to reality, but it also wasn't overly difficult.

"Surprisingly things have gone into place with a lot of synchronicity in a lot of ways," Sliva said. "I think it's just because I'm leading with my heart. This is my passion. It's what I want to do and I've seen already the impact with hiring the facilitators and camp counselors and the difference it's already made in their lives. So, it's actually not as hard as I would have thought because I love what I do."