

## **Girl Scouts:**

### **Where are we going? And who picks the direction?**

*Girl Scouting is searching for an identity. The GS corporate office wants to be recognized as the preeminent authority on all things relating to girls. The GSUSA Core Business Strategy implies that membership in Girl Scouting is a product: the more sold, the better. "Greenbloods" want to preserve values and tradition along with camps.*

*All agree that the defining characteristic of Girl Scouting is that it is girl-led. GSUSA tried to distill the essence of their successful tradition into six week courses that could be done anywhere by anyone. But it's not working. Meanwhile, councils are selling camps, fabricating statistics to justify the liquidations, and dismissing volunteer concerns.*

*If GSUSA corporate leadership stops serving their current members in hopes of attracting a larger customer base, they are undermining their reason for existence, betraying their girls, and alienating the members who fund them.*

#### **Direction of the Girl Scout Program**

Girl Scouts have been changing with the times since their beginning. They were started in England by the girls themselves. The first Girl Scout troop showed up at a Boy Scout rally in handmade, skirted uniforms and announced themselves to a startled Lord Baden Powell. He quickly re-named the female contingent "Girl Guides" and handed them off to his sister to organize.

#### **The Basics**

The American version of Girl Scouting was organized by Juliette Gordon Low in 1912. Girls embraced it enthusiastically because it gave them scope for their talents and energy. They learned skills that they put to use in community service.

Badges were developed to inspire new skills and to show what services a girl could provide. An example showing the seriousness of early badges: among the requirements for the cyclist badge in the original handbook was to own a bicycle. *"If she ceases to own a bicycle, she must return the badge"*. A girl also had to *"pledge to give the service of her bicycle to the government in case of need"*. But whether a girl was drawn to cycling or sports, engineering or art, home, business, politics - or all of the above; there were badges she could work toward. Running through this very diverse program of possibility was the strong emphasis on general preparedness, working within a small group of peers, and outdoor life. Most importantly, girls were encouraged to chart their own course.

From the beginning there were far more girls who wanted to join Girl Scouts than adults who could be recruited as leaders for them. Incremental changes in Girl Scouting kept pace with styles and trends through the decades. But always there were more girls than places in troops .

## **Organization and Money Flow**

The basic unit of Girl Scout program delivery was the troop. Troops met on a regular basis with an adult volunteer leader and one or more helpers. Girls in a troop worked together to plan and do projects. Troops in an area, say, a school district, were grouped into “neighborhoods” , “districts”, or “Service Units”. The leaders in a unit were organized by an experienced volunteer and met occasionally to plan larger events. All of these groups were part of a “council”. Generally a council would cover the area of one or more counties. Each council had an office and paid staff to provide services that a troop or service unit could not fund on its own such as camps and specialized programs. Each council was ( and is) is a franchise of the National organization: GSUSA.

Members pay national dues every year ( \$15 starting Oct 1, 2013). The council office is responsible for collecting the annual dues, but sends the entire amount to the National office of GSUSA. GSUSA provides liability and secondary medical insurance to all members. It oversees the design and production of uniforms, handbooks, and badges. It provides a national convention every three years.

Each council office provides a contact point for the local community, is a resource for the volunteers, and maintains the camps. If an area does not have a volunteer Service Unit Director, a council staff member is assigned to fill in. Council gets some of its funding through donations and grants. They get a little through their shops, campsite rentals, and program fees. But by far the largest source of council income is the Girl Scout cookie sale. The council office contracts with a bakery, organizes the distribution points, determines the incentives for its sales force ( the girls) and provides training for the leaders.

Girls sell cookies in the winter. They sell magazines, candy and nuts in the fall. They may set up additional troop money-earning projects with council approval. Most collect troop dues on a regular basis. Troop leaders and other volunteers do not get paid. Individual girls do not keep any of the money although they may earn individual incentives ( a patch, T-shirt, tickets to a theme park). The troop keeps a small percentage of the cookie income and turns the rest over to council. From their share of the earnings, troops buy their uniforms, badges, insignia, and handbooks. They pay for their own trips, campsites, craft supplies, and business expenses.

## **The Challenges**

By the late 1970's, Girl Scouting was in some ways becoming a victim of its own success. Confident and capable Girl Scout alumni were quick to take on the expanding roles for women. The entry of mothers into the paid workforce left them less time for large volunteer commitments like leading a troop. Membership numbers declined. Part of the drop was simply demographic: fewer babies born after the boom years of the 1950's & early 60's. Membership numbers rebounded in the 1980's thanks in part to an "echo boom", part to the introduction of the "Daisy" age level for Kindergartners.

But even as membership numbers were climbing again, the relative expense of providing program increased. Costs of liability insurance rose. Safety regulations increased and the cost of compliance added to the budget overhead. Some recreational / educational/service programs for children – not just Girl Scouting, but across the board nationally - folded because they were deemed too risky. Even some traditional service projects - such as providing child care at events- were curtailed because of the potential liability for the organization if the girls providing the service weren't performing up to public health regulations. Our 1920's Girl Scout ready to serve the government with her bicycle would not be allowed to help out anywhere near a disaster zone today.

In addition to stricter limits on meaningful service and high risk adventure, kids could more easily entertain themselves at home with an ever-expanding range of electronic devices. Older girls stayed in Girl Scouting IF they had established a group of good friends there OR if they had an active troop that traveled or camped frequently. But more often than not, girls dropped out by Junior High. The 1990's saw a flurry of new initiatives to make Girl Scouting "more relevant" to a changing world – and hopefully to keep the older girls in longer.

The Girl Scout Research Institute began in year 2000. One of its first projects was the "New Directions" study which set out to discover what older girls – ages 11 to 17 really wanted. Interviews were conducted with girls across the nation. Scouts and non-scouts. GSUSA planned to develop new programming for the older girls based on this study.

### **Failure #1: Studio2B. "New Directions" = No Directions**

In 2002 , GSUSA unveiled the new program, "Studio2B". It was long on hype, short on substance. Girls were told they could be and do whatever they wanted. Troop leaders were to let the girls decide their own program because the New Directions study revealed that

“adolescent girls do not want adults telling them what to do”. Groups were told that they could call themselves whatever they wanted- they didn’t have to use the name “Girl Scouts”. Older volunteers ( AKA middle aged moms) were discouraged from working with Studio2B groups because the study showed that adolescent girls responded most positively to college-age women.

At first, GSUSA told members that they could stay with traditional Girl Scouting program if they wanted, OR they could use the Studio2B model. But as more Studio2B products were developed, girls were told that the Studio2B workbooks were required for earning the Silver and Gold awards and that Studio2B was THE Girl Scout program for girls ages 11-17.

The central concept of allowing girls to choose and design their own program was not different from what Cadette and Senior troops were supposed to be doing anyway. The difference was in the marketing outreach to non-scouts. “Be whatever you want” sounds great. The problem was that Studio2B left the girls and volunteers to figure out how to make that happen. There was no particular benefit to new recruits that would inspire them to pay the dues to become an official Girl Scout. Studio2B was not without some fans, but the overwhelming response from members was disappointment. National responded to complaints with defensiveness, pointing out the amount of research that had gone into its development. A response that simply called into question the ability of GSUSA to transform research results into a successful program.

A few more years passed and Studio2B died a quiet death.

## **Failure #2 Overhaul - too much too fast**

But Girl Scouts was already changing again. National CEO Kathy Cloninger believed that the program had to be overhauled from top to bottom so that more girls could benefit . It had lost much time, energy and money on Studio2B. The 100th anniversary was within striking distance. A “Core Business Strategy “ was devised to expand the reach of Girl Scouting. Several massive changes in Girl Scout culture took place very rapidly starting in 2006

- **The national re-alignment of councils.** Combining small councils would take advantage of advances in communication technology and economics of scale to better serve girls. Councils were assigned to merge in batches starting on the east coast and moving west.
- **The core value** of Girl Scouting was identified as “Leadership “. The Girl Scout Leadership Experience was defined as “Discover, Connect, Take Action”.

- **A new core program called Journeys** was developed to support the GS Leadership Experience. Each age level, from Daisy to Ambassador, has three Journeys to choose from: *It's your World, Change it* ( group dynamics ); *It's Your Planet, Love it* ( environment ) ; and *It's Your Story, Tell It* ( communications). The Journeys were designed to work either in a traditional troop or in non-traditional formats called "Pathways". The idea was that short term programs ( 6 weeks) could be led by volunteers with minimal training because all the instructions would be in the guidebooks.
- **The age levels** were re-structured and a new program level; Ambassadors, added for 11-12 graders.
- **The annual cookie sale.** Previously acknowledged as a council fundraiser; it was re-defined as a "financial literacy program". Two new badges for each age level were developed to underscore the program aspects of the sale.
- **New Handbooks.** Each age level has a new handbook featuring lots of pictures, decreased content, and a few badge inserts in a three-ring binder. Additional badge inserts are available as packages sets sold separately.
- **Fewer badges.** Brownies previously earned "Try-it's. Cadettes, Seniors, and eventually Ambassadors earned "Interest Project Patches". They have all been renamed "Badges". But the number available has been drastically cut.

The scope and speed of the overhaul were de-stabilizing. With cooperation between staff, volunteers, and girls, Girl Scouting may have eventually worked through the growing pains. Instead, the split between administration goals and membership expectations contributed to a perfect storm of dysfunction.

In Girl Scouts of North East Ohio council (GSNEO) which was formed from the merger of 5 smaller "legacy" councils, the first sign of a problem was that many volunteers reported feeling shut out from helping at the council offices. This may have been due to the CEO's management style, or it may have been part of a move to reduce dependence on volunteers.

Next, council-sponsored events were concentrated round the central office, too far a drive for girls in the distant legacy councils. The promised "more opportunities for girls" only took place in the central and near- western regions.

The hoped-for advanced communication technology did not materialize. Just the opposite: the online program registration and campsite reservation system used by some of the legacy councils was discontinued. Phone reservations and credit card payments were not accepted.

The new core program -Journeys - were difficult for even experienced leaders to use. Girls complained that they were too much like schoolwork. GSUSA came out with a companion guide; *It's Your Journey, Customize it*, offering ways to change the Journeys to make them acceptable to the girls. As with Studio2B, GSUSA maintained that Journeys were optional, but then made them prerequisites for earning the highest awards.

Prior to the Overhaul, the annual cookie sale was acknowledged as the main fundraiser for councils. Girls earned the money by selling cookies. They turned most of the profits over to council, which in turn used a good portion of it to maintain camps. Troops could then use the camps at minimal cost. With the cookie sale re-defined as a "financial literacy program", girls are told that they are "cookie entrepreneurs" (in contrast to the dictionary definition of entrepreneurship). The sale itself is supposed to be so educational and exciting that it should hardly matter that most of the money gets handed over to the office where it is spent at the discretion of the adults in charge

In GSNEO, Girls made roughly 70 cents per \$3.50 package of cookies they sold. With 91 cents to the baker, an average of 1.90 went to the council office. Most of that went toward salaries, benefits, and overhead that do not serve girls the girls who earn it. Girls, parents, troop leaders, and even elected delegates have no say in how the council money is spent. In any other circumstance, this would be called "exploitation".

### **Failure #3 Selling Camps / Burning Bridges**

Prior to the council re-alignment, GSUSA mandated that no properties would be sold until at least two years after the mergers. Presumably, this would give the girls time to try the camps that were newly available to them and for council administrations to see how usage patterns developed. Camps that got little use could be sold and the council as a whole benefit from the income. This was not a secret. Members expected some losses. Everyone hoped their favorite camps would be kept, but trusted that the decision process would be realistic and fair.

But right at the two year mark, beloved and oft-used camps were put up for sale.

Camp Eagle Island of New York's Adirondack region was never even opened by GS Heart of New Jersey council. A National Historic Landmark, it was put up for sale unseen by most girls in the newly formed council.

Volunteers on informal email groups noticed some councils practicing preemptive neglect: targeted properties got little or no maintenance. When problems occurred, administration would say the property was too deteriorated to fix and put it up for sale.

GSNEO closed the first nine of its fourteen camps "because hardly anyone was using them" when in fact, the council was not *letting* troops use them. Many troops attempting to reserve spots at targeted camps were told nothing was available.

It was said that only 10% of the girls go camping; that it wasn't fair to put the majority of council resources into a program that only benefit a small minority. But in GSNEO and in GS of Eastern Iowa/Western Illinois, reviews of council camping data showed that the real percentage of their girls using council camps was over 50%. GSEIWI temporarily backed off their camp liquidation plan. In GSNEO, the correction had no effect.

GSUSA CEO Anna Marie Chavez says "girls can still camp if they want to". But giving permission is a far cry from providing the needed infrastructure. Bare acknowledgement that that girls *can* camp is not the same as encouraging them to explore outdoors or providing camp training and support to volunteers.

### **Success and Possibility : THE GIRL SCOUT LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE**

Kathy Cloninger and her team were right when they defined the primary value of Girl Scouting as "Leadership". If "leadership" is defined as: making decisions, having the courage to stand up for one's beliefs, encouraging others, and working through differences ; Girl Scouts have always done it. "Leadership" is just a more streamlined ( and trendier) word.

According to the Girl Scout Research Institute, traditional Girl Scouting has been very successful in promoting leadership. Women who grew up with three or more years of Girl Scouting now have higher incomes, more education, deeper civic involvement, and more satisfying personal relationships than those who were never Girl Scouts. But not one of those successful alumni filled out a Journeys workbook. They experienced the "cookies, crafts, service projects, and camping" model that is in the process of being discarded by GSUSA .

So, how do we package our previously successful program for leadership so that it works for the world today? How do we make it faster, cheaper, and broader-based? The Journeys were an attempt to do just that. With some adjustments, the Journeys *might* turn out to be a good addition to the GS Leadership Experience. But they are no substitute.

The kind of achievement that girls get from Girl Scouting can't be bought quickly. There is no fast track to real leadership development, just like there is no express lane to a Black Belt, an Olympic Championship, or a Ph.D. All take serious commitments of time, money, and individualized mentoring. If GSUSA wants to continue its previous success, it needs to build on its strengths. Camping is the flagship venue for our program delivery. This doesn't mean that every council keeps a token camp or three. It means every council supports enough campsites for every troop to camp at least a couple times every year. Camping can be adapted to a variety of styles and goals. But to do that, we have to have the camps. Our own camps. Dedicated to girls, safe for girls, that we can use for Girl Scout programming.

Just as "leadership" has to be viewed more broadly than a presidency and an executive suite, camping also has to be viewed in broader terms than production of "wilderness survivors". The benefit of camp is that it helps a girl to adapt to new, sometimes challenging; situations. She learns to improvise. She has to focus on her responsibility to work with her peers to accomplish needed tasks. In troop camping, she has to plan a budget and a schedule, and she lives with the outcome of her planning for a weekend. In camp she lives closer to nature. How close depends on the type of accommodation. But "nature" is where all of us live, whether we acknowledge it or not. By familiarizing herself with the interplay of earth and sky, flora and fauna, she gains a basis for understanding the principals upon which scientific principals are built. In our increasing reliance on technology, girls need a time away from their screens; places where they renew face to face friendships, practice hand-on skills, and see the beauty of the real world

Camps are expensive to maintain and upgrade. NO ONE disputes that. But they are worth it. Girls need them. And girls have been paying for them through years of cookie sales.

Volunteers have suggested that instead of expecting every troop leader to learn every skill, we can set up a division of labor. Not all of us want to be troop leaders. Some of us want to be dedicated camp volunteers – working with troops on a short term basis, or as on-site resources, leading hikes, teaching skills, telling stories.

Maybe not every girl in America wants to camp. But by providing an excellent program for those who do, others can be persuaded to try it. Maybe some will never be wilderness survivors. But they can still benefit from learning to live away from home for a weekend. Girl Scouting can be more than a product- it can be an influence.

## **WHO gets to decide?**

In business, the owner of a company decides what kind of product to produce. The customers can either take it or leave it. In a non-profit corporation, the board of directors has roughly the same responsibility as the owner of a company. It makes sense for owners to deliver what their customers want. But in Girl Scouting, it's more than that. Girl Scouting is about girl leadership. Everything else is optional, but decision making by the girls is the most fundamental aspect of what it means to be a Girl Scout.

GSUSA is certainly within its rights to try to expand its market – but not at the expense of its current members. That's because in Girl Scouting – responsibility for the program belongs to the members. If council and national boards believe in Girl Leadership, then they are obligated to respect and act upon the opinion of the girls who have already committed to the program. If they don't, Girl Scouting becomes a farce.

Former national CEO Kathy Cloninger wrote “ [at Girl Scouts] people at every level not only have an opinion, they expect it to be listened to. Our top brass can't just go off on their own and agree on a new process. We are a highly inclusive, participatory organization”

## **The Lessons of GSNEO**

The code of Regulations for GSNEO states that the General Assembly works with the board of directors to determine the direction of Girl Scouting within the geographic jurisdiction of the council.

The FAQs that came out to justify the GSNEO property plan repeatedly tried to show that they were adhering to the GS expectation of member participation by claiming “ our members told us they wanted this” .

It was because of the misrepresentation of member opinion that the GSNEO delegates brought the camp issue to a formal vote. Prior focus groups, individual letters, and the property survey all showed the girls felt camping with traditional activities was very important. But these methods of finding out majority opinion are not necessarily definitive. A formal vote is.

Three resolutions were presented - all with slightly different wording and effects. They all required accurate, honest evaluation and approval of the membership through its General

Assembly before any properties were closed or sold. All the correct procedures were followed so that everyone in the Assembly got advance written notice.

The GSNEO board of Directors is bound by the code of regulations to act in accordance with the members. Members elect delegates to represent them in General Assembly. Therefore, the board needed to know how the delegates would vote in order to know how they should vote. The first resolution was written to be a formal opinion poll of the membership delegates. However, the chairman of the board chose to skip the poll. He had the entire General Assembly, including the Board of Directors, vote on the resolution. It passed by 60% majority.

Since the vote did not turn out the way they wanted, the board later said it was “ a non-binding resolution”. But rather than quibble over technicalities of wording or participation, it is crucial to look at the broader picture. When the board refused to accept their own vote, GSNEO became declared itself to be in conflict with its members. It is a nonprofit organization that exists to promote leadership by girls, that is primarily funded by the girls, but where responsible adults refuse to listen to the girls.

Members appealed to GSUSA, but were rebuffed.

Representatives for the board later testified in court that GSNEO simply could not afford to keep all of the remaining seven camps open. However, GSNEO has a yearly budget of over eleven million dollars, eight million of which is provided through product sales by girls. GSNEO regularly hires new staff and has even created new staff positions. They granted a hefty bonus to their CEO. They maintain six offices. They refused generous conservation easements on two of the camps they wish to sell. They refused offers by groups of volunteers who wished to take responsibility for camp repairs. The council has the dollars. The question is how they are choosing to allocate them.

Ironically, GSNEO and GSUSA have chosen to depart from girl leadership to pursue an agenda of their own.

At the time of this writing, it's not too late to turn Girl Scouting around. But it will involve administrators admitting their past mistakes and having an honest conversation with members.

Christiansen, Betty Girl Scouts: A Celebration of 100 Trailblazing Years 2011

Cloninger, Kathy Tough Cookies: Leadership Lessons from 100 years of the Girl Scouts 2011

GSNEO code of Regulations

<http://www.gsneo.org/media/1332/cor%204-4-2009%20adopted.pdf>

GS Research Institute Girl Scouting Works: the Alumni Impact Study

[http://www.girlscouts.org/research/publications/girlscouting/alumnae\\_impact\\_study.asp](http://www.girlscouts.org/research/publications/girlscouting/alumnae_impact_study.asp)

GSUSA constitution [http://www.girlscouts.org/who\\_we\\_are/facts/pdf/2012\\_blue\\_book.pdf](http://www.girlscouts.org/who_we_are/facts/pdf/2012_blue_book.pdf)

GSUSA history

[http://www.girlscouts.org/who\\_we\\_are/history/highlights\\_2008.pdf](http://www.girlscouts.org/who_we_are/history/highlights_2008.pdf)

[http://www.girlscouts.org/who\\_we\\_are/facts/pdf/2011\\_annual\\_report.pdf](http://www.girlscouts.org/who_we_are/facts/pdf/2011_annual_report.pdf)