

Building self-esteem

Press-Telegram, Daily Breeze, Daily News

February 11, 2008

By A.K. Whitney, Staff writer

When Raven looks at herself in the mirror in the morning, the first word that pops into her head is "ugly."

When Myra compares herself to pictures of Hollywood starlets in magazines, she feels like a monster.

Charlotte worries that only black girls with light skin seem to wind up with the cute guys.

But all the outsider sitting on a folding metal chair about 10 feet away can see is three young women full of youth and potential. And yes, each is also pretty - Raven has great hair, Myra has lovely eyes, and Charlotte's dark brown skin glows with health.

But it's often very hard to turn off the negative voices in your head, particularly when they're reinforced not just by the media but, worse, by peers and family.

For Raven, Myra, Charlotte and 16 other young women who are students at Gertz-Ressler High School in Los Angeles, though, there is help. They all signed up to take part in a yearlong program organized by the Step Up Women's Network and sponsored by the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty.

Step Up Women's Network, a nonprofit organization, was started by talent agent Karen Popofsky Kramer after her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. The organization started in Los

Angeles but has since opened chapters nationwide.

The aim of this particular high-school program: helping young women, particularly those of economically disadvantaged backgrounds, work on their self-esteem.

The program at Gertz-Ressler High started in January, said manager Jamie Kogan, and apart from weekly after-school meetings, the participants get to participate in sessions with special guests.

Their first special session, held Jan. 30, was moderated by author and self-esteem coach Jessica Weiner, and the guest was actress Hilarie Burton, best-known for playing Peyton Sawyer on The WB's "One Tree Hill."

Burton, who lives in North Carolina (where "Hill" is taped), was on hiatus due to the Writers Guild of America strike and said she was happy to fly in to take part in the event.

Before she arrived, Weiner warmed up the crowd.

"My last name is Weiner," she said, pronouncing it WEE-ner.
"Please laugh. It's OK."

Weiner went on to tell her audience why she chose to talk about self-esteem for a living.

"I didn't think being a girl in the world mattered unless you were tall, skinny, blond," she said.

After battling an eating disorder and substance abuse, Weiner said, she pulled herself together in college and made helping other women her mission.

The goal for the session ahead, she said, was "getting a Hollywood

reality check."

That reality check, embodied by Burton, started when the actress arrived and showed pictures of herself as an awkward teen.

"I did not feel cute," Burton said. "I was totally dorky, and in second grade they realized I was blind (and needed glasses to see). I was the geeky kid, and I couldn't sit with the cool girls. It's been 15 to 20 years, and it still affects you."

Add to that growing up poor with three bratty brothers, and things looked bleak for the Virginia native, until she discovered acting.

Though she went from ugly duckling to Hollywood swan, Burton does acknowledge that "One Tree Hill" is part of the problem.

"Image is a big thing," she said. "We're guilty of perpetrating that on our show. It's not real at all. Look at it like you're going to Disneyland."

To drive the point home, the participants were shown photos of models before and after they were retouched. The differences were startling, even to someone familiar with the art of Photoshop. Not just lines were erased but also freckles. Sometimes eyes were enlarged, noses shrunk and necks lengthened. In most cases, the "before" picture was actually better.

Weiner and Burton both shared stories of being altered in photos.

"If you ever see me in a picture with boobs, it's so fake," said Burton.

The session lasted two hours and also included role-playing and an exercise called "The Matrix," in which Burton, Raven and Myra wrote on a large board about not just how they see themselves but also how family and friends see them.

"Family impacts your self-esteem," Weiner said. "So do your friends. Ever come to school, and nobody will talk to you?"

This brought a majority response.

"We get used to looking at other girls like competition," Weiner said.

And if a girl, even a good friend, seems to have self-esteem, we are often quick to squash them, Weiner said.

"We have to get used to girls being powerful," she said.

Or maybe powerful is the wrong word. We have to get used to girls believing in themselves and having confidence.

According to Charlotte, at least, that is the simplest definition of "self-esteem."