Doin’ It for Themselves

With her bold HOTGIRLS program, Carla Stokes, PhD, teaches young black women to realize their worth.

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She knows what she wants—and she wants it now.
“I want for African-American girls to develop a healthy sense of self and their sexuality,” says Dr. Carla Stokes, who has worked tirelessly to develop HOTGIRLS (Helping Our Teen Girls in Real Life Situations). The Atlanta-based nonprofit tackles the toxic conditions challenging today’s girls: poor self-esteem, street harassment, violence and HIV/AIDS. “African-American girls are looking at music videos and other forms of media and performing what they see to attract men,” adds Stokes. “Anything from the pimpette to the down-ass chick.”

But Stokes is more than a sista who’s down for the community.
She has transformed her own personal experiences with these issues into a rallying cry. “Growing up, I would emulate what I saw on television and wear revealing clothing,” Stokes says. “I wanted to be a playa. My mother warned me, but I didn’t listen.” It wasn’t until she enrolled at Atlanta’s Spelman College that Stokes found better female role models. “Reading books [in college] from bell hooks and other black feminists, along with being exposed to other positive African-American women, showed me a different way [of thinking].” This pro-sistahood consciousness quickly became the focus of her studies, which included the effect that negative media images have on the thinking and behavior of young black women and girls.

In 2001, Stokes decided she could no longer sit back and do nothing.
So she went out and applied for funding, eventually creating HOTGIRLS. Every week, it treats around 30 Atlanta teens to a variety of innovative, non-judgmental workshop discussions, such as the origins of media images like “the Mammy” and the “Video Vixen,” and how degrading rap lyrics play a role in everyday life. The teenagers even have the opportunity to listen, dissect and rewrite popular songs to incorporate more positive lyrics.

It’s working.
Stokes recalls a young woman who changed her computer screen name “Dime Piece” (meaning a beautiful woman, or perfect 10) after a discussion on how black women’s bodies were bought, sold and abused during slavery. “She told me she did not want to refer [to her worth] in that way anymore,” says Stokes, who is now focused on expanding the group’s reach. Its new interactive website, FIREGRL.com, which launched earlier this year, is designed to inform and inspire young

black women throughout the country. What's more, a $40,000 grant last July from the Ms. Foundation for Women will help Stokes develop a national campaign celebrating the positive aspects of black girlhood. "We know [what they do wrong], but we also want to celebrate what they are doing right."

Listen to "Let Me Tell You How to Talk to Me," HOTGIRLS' anti-street-harassment song, at helpingourteengirls.org*.*

Real Talk

Stokes' tips to parents: "Sex, and violence against women, are taboo topics in our community, but you must have those talks with your sons and daughters. Stress the importance of respecting women and themselves."

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