

Lady Researchers: Mapping Urban Community and Learning Spaces

Carla Dawson

(excerpt of remarks at the Cambio de Colores Conference, June 9, 2016)

Background

The ISU 4U Promise is an early commitment joint program of Iowa State University and King and Moulton elementary schools in the Des Moines urban neighborhoods. Design Dialogues is a community-engaged research project that serves youth in gender-specific after-school Children and Families Urban Movement (CFUM) programs by having them “map” the learning spaces in their community.

Carla Dawson Speaks from the Heart

In this relationship that we have throughout the Design Dialogues, ISU 4U came to us and said, “Because of your work with CFUM, we’d like to partner with you on doing the Design Dialogues.” We were like, “Hey, that’s so good!” The kids go to one of the schools that ISU 4U is partnered with, Moulton Elementary, and have also been in the CFUM program since they were in kindergarten.

We have a breakfast program that we serve in the morning, and they come after school to a program called The Haven.¹ The breakfast part of it started in 1968 by the Black Panthers at Trinity United Methodist. So it’s not new in our neighborhood and it’s directly across the street from the school. Because we have the kids that they need to work with in the community, and they’re a captive audience, they come every day so it’s not like we have to pull kids from all over because they are from the neighborhood.

We were thinking, “If kids start thinking about their neighborhoods in different ways, and about their communities in different ways, and seeing [themselves as] the researchers in their community and experts in their neighborhood that know what’s good and what’s not good in their school, then we can work with them.”

I am the coordinator of the program called the Whyld Girls,² also named the Lady Researchers. And when we say, “Whyld Girls, Ladies, we’re getting ready to do research.” They’re like, “Yes!” You would never think that sixth grade girls or ninth grade girls would really love to be researchers, but they are. The Whyld Girls program started 13 years ago because a lot of the girls in our community—and I live in that community so I can speak from experience—were having babies at young ages, were not finishing school, and were not making the best life choices for themselves. So we started the Whyld Girls program and we wanted to teach the girls that you have empowerment...help them learn that they have empowerment and what they can do with their life if they make different choices. If you make choices in sixth grade not to go to school, the outcome won’t be so good when it’s time to graduate. You’re probably not going to graduate. So the Whyld Girls do that and they do it with zeal.

Our oldest Whyld Girl, who started the program when she was in fifth grade, graduated this year with her master’s from the University of Northern Iowa as a child psychologist. We have a Whyld Girl who just graduated from the University of Iowa; she got accepted into PharmD³ programs at Drake University and the University of Iowa. We have Whyld Girls who are in other colleges. Our senior Whyld Girl graduated as valedictorian from North High School with a 4.127 GPA and a 30 ACT.

We’re talking about girls who look like a lot of you girls in here. We’re talking about CFUM and I would say 45 percent of our girls are Latina, 45 percent are African American, 5 percent are Asian, and 5 percent are Caucasian. We’re talking about a diverse group of young ladies; we’re not talking about what everyone thinks about when they

think about kids. We're talking about a group of girls who are changing their lives, changing their communities, and changing their families. Our Whyld Girls' motto is: "We have wild dreams for ourselves, for our community, and for our world." And then we say, "Go out and dream." 'Cause these are the dreams we have for Whyld Girls, but they also have them for themselves. And they also have them for the community and for the world.

Three of my Whyld Girls just received [recognition from] the Chrysalis Foundation⁴, a women's empowerment foundation. It's big; we're talking about women who are power brokers, lawyers and doctors. They have 10 scholarships that they give out, and the Whyld Girls received 3 of the 10. So we're talking about helping girls make better life choices.

So as you can see, you might not be able to read my shirt, but the Whyld Girls, and the Backyard Boyz⁵ came up with this shirt. It's called the "alternative F word." And the alternative F word is "Future." They came up with this; it was not my idea. So working with ISU and having our girls map their community and their world, seeing what's good in their community, seeing what needs to be changed, seeing how they fit as researchers and doing the change is helping them be the change that they want to see in their community.

You know it's one thing if I can help myself, but it's another thing if I can help somebody else. And we're big about not only helping girls who are in Whyld Girls, but helping our community. For Whyld Girls to engage in steps to make their schools and communities better is a win-win! The Whyld Girls have dreams. To make a dream a reality they will learn in the process that it is better to work on solutions and not get stuck on the problem. Being an integral part of finding solutions makes you believe that you are the change the world needs.



About the Author

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References

McNelly, C.A., Dawson, C.A., Richardson Bruna, K. (2016, June). Lady researchers: Mapping urban community and learning spaces. At Building Bridges, Dialogue, and Opportunity, 15th Annual Cambio de Colores (Change of Colors) Conference — Latinos in the Heartland. Columbia, Missouri.

¹The Haven is an after-school program offered during the extended school year at Moulton Extended Learning Center (mid July–May) that offers literacy enrichment, homework help, and recreation and creative activities for grade school children.

²The Whyld Girls is a gender-specific program of CFUM that focuses on girls in grades 6 through 12. It is designed to encourage self-devopment and to support.

³The PharmD degree program is a four-year professional program that prepares students for community or institutional

practice, postgraduate education, or the many other practice opportunities available to pharmacists.

⁴The Chrysalis Foundation is a women's empowerment foundation dedicated to increasing resources and opportunities for girls and women in Greater Des Moines.

⁵Backyard Boyz is a gender-specific program of CFUM that focuses on boys in grades 6 through 8 and designed to encourage healthy self-development and to support choices that result in meeting academic and life goals.