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Celebrating 5 Years of an Olympian Vision of Women's Leadership

by Ruth Leubecker

When Olympia Snowe retired from the Senate, stating that she could no longer function amidst such dysfunction, many Americans debated her leavetaking and the loss of her presence.

During storied decades of service, her impressive accomplishments included the E-Rate program that brought the Internet to every library and classroom in the nation; hiking the child tax credit and making it refundable, affecting about 37 million working families; and co-authoring the Genetic Nondiscrimination Act, referred to as "the first major civil rights act of the 21st century."

What could she possibly do next?

The Women's Leadership Institute had been her brainchild for some time, born of her background of determination and helping others over a lifetime of service. Over the past five years this nonprofit, Snowe's vision in action, has helped hundreds of young women achieve their long-term goals.

"Our plan is to serve 540 girls across the state. We have 36 partner schools in Maine," says Christina McAnuff, executive director of the WLI. "We're in our fifth year, and at this point, we've leveled off. We grew very fast. We're going to stay at this level for the next few years because we've exceeded our expectations."

The institute has three full-time staff, three part-time staff and a host of volunteers and corporate leaders. "We have hundreds of financial supporters," explains McAnuff. "Each girl is selected by teachers and administrators in their school. These are girls who might not raise their hands in the classroom. They could be shy, or just tend to hold back."

The program involves three years, beginning in their sophomore year of high school. "Year one is about values, with a focus on exploring their personal strengths and passions. Their junior year is about their voice -- how to communicate with others. The third year is where do I want to go? So you have values, voice and vision."

The girls attend one monthly meeting during the school year; in November all 540 of Olympia's Leaders (15 from each of the 36 high schools) meet in Bangor for a full-day conference with Snowe, facilitators and invited guests. In May the institute hosts two regional "year end" celebrations recognizing graduating senior girls and offering networking.

Snowe's personal experiences formed a blueprint for the organization. She believes that values serve as signposts and anchors for important life decisions. Born and raised in Maine, she was orphaned at nine and raised by her aunt and uncle. Widowed at 26, she ran in a special election, and won her deceased husband's seat, paving the way for her service in the Maine House and Senate, and beyond, to the US House and Senate.

At the time she said, "My experience with loss informed my reaction. I discovered that the best way to manage grief was to move forward, and make a positive out of a negative."

Snowe firmly believes that Maine girls can build any skill and achieve any dream — and she is living proof of that. Following her goals, while in Congress she helped broker the deal for childcare funding during welfare reform, introduced the first bill to combat Alzheimer's, and fought against substandard trade deals in the lumber, fishing and paper industries.

Snowe is a consistent presence at the institute, attending the two annual events held for the girls as well as regularly providing input into the curriculum, policy decisions and strategic direction.

Olympia's Leaders, aka the girls, are committed to attending the scheduled meetings, in-school meetings and in-person gatherings, as well as completing about 20 minutes of reflections/writings between meetings.

The program, five years old and growing, anticipates continued growth and involvement as more classes graduate and assume leadership roles in their communities and beyond.