

CELEBRATING GIRL UP

Full interview with Rocio Ortega, Teen Advisor for Girl Up

1. *What is the most important aspect of your work as a Teen Advisor for Girl Up?*

It's really tough to narrow down the most important aspect of my work as a Girl Up Teen Advisor. I mean who wouldn't love to spend in person meetings with other 13 teenage girls from across the country and work toward issues that matter to us like the end to child marriage, education, health and safety for our global sisters. The thing is when you have a room full of teenage girls like us who want to speak for girls in developing countries, well, you know we're about to change the world! Being a Teen Advisor and getting the opportunity to work with a range full of people from our Girl Up Campaign Advisors, to Girl Up Champions like Victoria Justice or a five-year-old girl who has taken the initiative to raise funds for Girl Up, is just satisfying! Really the connections you make and the friendships that develop, all for a bright future of girls living in developing countries is phenomenal. Knowing that there's a team ready to listen to a young girl like me, to change the world, is the most important aspect of being a Teen Advisor.

2. *What is most satisfying to you personally about that work?*

Personally, female empowerment isn't a subject talked about in my family, school or community. There's a high level of "machismo" (stereotypical masculinity) present so when I introduced Girl Up to my high school, I was overwhelmed with the response of many young girls and boys who wanted to speak up for girls living in developing countries. I really noticed the change in my high school peers when I saw them screaming from the top of their lungs at our club fair to recruit members. Garfield High School's club has been running since I founded it in 2010 and although I graduated from high school already, there's a new class of boys and girls who are ready to lead the Girl Up club. I never thought the club would have a high impact in our school, community and lives. Because of Girl Up, female empowerment is now an issue worth discussing about in our homes, school and community. There's nothing more rewarding than seeing a younger generation take on the work you planted and watch them spread the Girl Up message.

3. *Our exhibition explores the themes below, can you respond to each of these with your thoughts on why they are important generally and with regards to Girl Up?*

- A) Girls Helping girls –is the most critical ingredient to achieving our goals. If we all just stop negative actions like gossip, bullying, etc, we can actually come together and build the bond of sisterhood to face greater issues than us. Issues like fighting for the rights of girls around the world! That's what we do here at Girl Up, we're just girls helping girls!

- B) Importance of Girls' Education – “investing in girls is smart economics,” as said by Ambassador at Large for Women’s Issues, Melanne Vermeer. It’s not rocket science to know that investing in a girl’s education will give her the right tools to earn her personal freedom and power. Seriously, there are 67 million children in the world who don’t attend school and over half of them are girls. Women and girls reinvest 90% of their income, isn’t that enough to invest in girls’ education? In my family I’m among the first to attend college, I just don’t see why girls my age or younger than me in other parts of the world, shouldn’t have the same right.
- C) Leadership – more young girls should be given the opportunity to lead their own lives and issues they’re passionate about. It’s amazing to know that 90% of the worldwide domestic workforce is girls under 16. I remember babysitting for a summer or like on weekends for my neighbors, but I never considered it as a full time job or serving by force. That wouldn’t leave a lot of “me” time but unfortunately this is the reality for most girls living in developing countries. That’s why I love Girl Up, because we encourage girls to speak up and handle their own lives. No one should tell a young girl how to live her life – it’s her choice.
- D) the Power of One – How does one silly signature on the End to Child Marriage petition make a difference? Well, it actually makes a huge difference. I know at times we sometimes ask ourselves how one signature or one vote makes a difference. But imagine a large group of girls and boys across the country and even across the globe who have just signed the same petition as you, we all make a difference. One should never underestimate the power of one because all it takes is one person to speak up and lead a large crowd of motivated young people. We’re never alone.
- E) Altruism – I can’t think of a better group of people that are self-less than the Girl Up team. You have the Teen Advisors who really dedicate themselves to raise awareness and funds for Girl Up. We have wonderful mentors and young teenagers around the country and the globe who gives up their time to work for issues that our dear to us. We don’t do it for appraisal or recognition; we do it because we know it’s the ethical thing to do – to help our global sisters. Everyone should give a little of their time and effort because it makes a huge difference for the people around you.

4. *As a young girl, were you aware of the hardships faced by girls in other countries? If yes, did this affect the choices you made as a teen?*

As a young girl, I did know to some extent about the hardships that girls go through every day in developing countries. The older women in my life like my mother, sister and aunts were born in rural Mexico where it was a shame to be a girl. It was the norm to not attend high school or college and just be a stay in home mother for the remainder of your years. Female empowerment wasn’t stressed so when I came across a growing non-profit called Global Girl Media, they introduced me to the lives of positive HIV South African girls who have the same aspirations as me just not the same rights. Then came a little book called Half the Sky, by Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn that led me to Girl Up. Being educated about the hardships faced by girls in other countries definitely opened my eyes and made me want to do something about it. I never took my education, rights, health or anything for

granted. I'm blessed to have a little sister who I'm educating about all these hardships and exposing her at such a young age so she can continue the fight for global female empowerment.

5. *Do you think altruism is a value that is missing from today's youth in general?*

No. I've come across a wide range of teenagers who are eager to make the biggest difference in the world that they can. The trouble that we come across to is knowledge of the many non-profit organizations out there that need our young teenage voices. At least that's how I felt. I was ready to make a difference but I wasn't sure how to or with whom to communicate with about these issues. We all need help from mentors to give us a running start and eventually we'll be able to take on issues on our own. We just need a running start.

6. *What are the personal rewards for helping others? Especially other girls?*

Personal rewards include getting a pat on the back or having adults in your community see you beyond a teenager speaking your mind. Personally, it's rewarding for me seeing girls from my high school take on leadership roles towards the Girl Up cause and seeing your characteristics in younger girls. Helping other girls is rewarding enough but when someone takes the time to tell you thank you like Guatemalan girls did when we sent letters to them in Spanish, was breathtaking! It's great to know that your time and effort is appreciated by the young girls who are part of Girl Up in developing countries.

7. *At 17, you have a very distinguished resume already, including work in Washington DC, with aspirations of studying Political Science. What do you think about the fact that most aspects of girls' lives are political?*

The bright side of having politics come in a girl's life is when policies protect her. Ethiopia, a country that Girl Up works in, has the rural Amhara region where 43% of girls are married by the age of 15. This is one of the highest child marriage rates in the world! Yet, in this country, marriage is only legal between consenting adults who are at least 18 years old. Developing countries like India, Zimbabwe and Sierra Lone have their respective laws to combat child marriage. These laws are there to protect young girls. The problem is that these laws may not necessarily be implemented, or resources are scarce. I feel like the lives of girls get political when there are drastic events like child marriage, health issues, or being deprived from education.

8. *What is the most important life lesson or message about Girl Up you would like to get across/share with other American girls?*

Being a young girl is not a crime! It's a gift. Though we have our own hardships, we must come together and admit the fact that while we are strong, together we are stronger. I can speak for girls living in developing countries but the more that can speak the merrier! If not now, then when? Let's continue the efforts that our predecessors have started. I'm first generation Mexican-American, born from two Mexican native parents who didn't go to high school or college but risked their lives so I can have a bright future. I learned that you don't have to be a superhero to save the lives of young girls, just be yourself and you'll be amazed at what you can accomplish!