

# Girls Inc. reflections by Patti Loch Shelton

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 30, 2010)

As I have researched the history of Girls Incorporated of Oak Ridge (Girls Inc.), I have enjoyed seeing the dedication of several individuals working long and hard with only the thought of doing good things for girls. It is this Oak Ridge tradition of dedicated volunteerism that often surfaces when I look into various elements of our history. It is here in Girls Inc., in spades!

An example comes from the Executive Director with the longest tenure, Patti Loch Shelton. She served the organization for 11 years from September 1994 to November 2005. Here are Patti's comments:

"I was hired as Executive Director of Girls Inc. in 1994. We were then housed in the YWCA, had a wonderful staff of three with full time Paula Zarestly as Sports Director, Donna Von der lage as Outreach Coordinator and Marsha Zulliger as after-school elementary coordinator. Also Betty Trabalka volunteered in many capacity's and was hired on as a part time van driver (we had only 1 van!)

"I had a wonderful supportive Board of Directors, which continued thru my tenure. Our budget was very small way under \$100,000 and when I attended my first Regional meeting in Sarasota, Florida, the next year I tried to 'hide' or disappear into the woodwork as my sister Girls Inc had \$300,000, \$500,000 or even million dollar budgets. I really thought, 'what am I doing here?' Right then and there I decided that Oak Ridge TN was going to get on the map of Girls Incorporated world and become strong. There was only one problem - how was that going to happen?

"In 1995 we moved to the Fraternal Order of Police Building on Warehouse Road on the east side of Oak Ridge. With the support of the Police Chief and fellow officers, we were able to save monies (had minimal rent) and raise monies from our fundraisers to build our home, where Girls Inc. is now standing

"My board president Steve Cates and I picked out our colors, floors, where we wanted the rooms, etc., and in 2000 we opened our doors. We were then able to serve many more girls

"Our budget grew and we grew. We had 40-45 girls each day after school at our facility. We had outreach programs in Clinton, Norris, Lake City as well as Briceville. We served 225 girls in basketball each year. We served 400 girls in softball and 150 girls in flag football, golf, tennis, etc.

"My job as the Executive Director of our City's 50th Birthday enabled me to bring our community event of decorating trees at Christmas and getting companies, individuals, etc., involved. I knew that this could be a great money maker and called non-profits before I took the job as Director of Girls Inc. Many thought it would be too much work and they were right!

"But I talked our board into letting us try and I think the first year with three weeks to prepare we made about \$1500. Then our guardian angels stepped up to the challenge and thus Our Parade of Trees was reborn and until this day is Girls Inc.'s largest fundraiser. This enabled us to build our present home.

"In 2005, Girls Inc. of Oak Ridge hosted its first Regional Meeting in our city. Girls Incorporated staff and board members from Florida, Alabama, Georgia and from all over the southeast region came and looked over our town and we put on a fantastic meeting. I wanted everyone in our organization, our National Executive Director, staff and board members to take notice of us and that they did!

"I can't thank my unbelievable staff though the years for the love and support they brought to each and every girl. The volunteer coaches, parents, referees, etc., have made Girls Inc. what it is today.

"One of our 'special moments' was creating a new program for all of Girls Inc. to benefit from. Galaxy Girls was born right here in Oak Ridge. We received grant monies and, best of all, our program was formulated and customized and then it was sent out to our national headquarters to pass on to other Girls Inc. organizations around the country.

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"Girls Inc. would not be here today without dedicated people. I can't say enough about the wonderful ladies who were my 'everything' in this wonderful, magical girls club we were building. If I learned one thing, it is that one person cannot do this without a dedicated and caring staff. I truly had the best! Everyone had their job and performed. They never hesitated to lend a helping hand to any of their fellow comrades or to the girls. We did not punch clocks, but we all stayed until we finished the job!

"Over the years, Girls Inc. was not only my job, but became my passion. Girls Inc. became part of me and it will never leave me because to see just one girl excel in something she never thought possible or to strengthen a girls character and teach her that with hard work and dedication anything is possible is very humbling. I have seen many remarkable young ladies emerge from Girls Inc. as strong, smart and bold citizens of our future!

"Judy Craig, Lori Trabalka, Mindy McNabb, Tylie Prince and Connie Douglas are but a few names of people who helped mold Girls Inc. into what it is today. We worked with the Volunteering Program through Oak Ridge schools in the summer, we teamed up with the Japanese School in Sweetwater and had exchange days. So many memories....

Patti has done exactly what I knew she would do and she has certainly done it well. Can't you just read her passion? Can't you feel her heart for young girls? Don't you know "Strong, Smart and Bold" holds a special meaning for her and for all those who work with Girls Inc.

Thank you Patti, you inspire!



Patti Loch Shelton shown with obvious pride with the chalk art created in May of 2000 by the girls of Girls Inc.