

## Leader of Gwen's Girls finds meaning in her work

March 20, 2015 12:00 AM

By Kathleen Ganster

Lynn Knezevich knew immediately that she wanted to help the late Gwen Elliott establish “Gwen’s Girls.”

Ms. Knezevich had worked in social work for several years when Ms. Elliott, one of the first female, African-American police officers in Pittsburgh and a former commander on the force, decided to create a nonprofit in 2002 to empower girls and young women by providing them with “holistic, gender-specific programs, education and experiences.”

“I wanted to help Gwen realize her dream. I knew that when you work with a girl or woman and help them ... they are going to help others,” said Ms. Knezevich, of Squirrel Hill, who has been executive director of Gwen’s Girls since it was founded.

Ms. Knezevich, 61, grew up in Clairton and attended the University of Pittsburgh, where she received bachelor’s and master’s degrees. After working as a social worker and then in management in the field, she had the opportunity to help launch Gwen’s Girls.

“I liked the idea of starting an organization from scratch, especially this organization,” she said.

Gwen’s Girls is a nonprofit that provides services for girls and young women, including residential and foster

care, community and school-based programs, and career exploration. The services include three residential programs in Clairton, Wilkinsburg and the North Side, according to Ms. Knezevich.

Establishing Gwen's Girls meant a great deal to Ms. Knezevich.

"I had the honor and pleasure to work with Gwen for the first five years of Gwen's Girls," she said. Ms. Elliott died of cancer in 2007. Ms. Knezevich has been with the organization since its founding.

The nonprofit received a \$23,000 grant from Duquesne Light to support its job readiness program for at-risk girls in career exploration and workplace readiness.

"It is important for our young women living in urban neighborhoods to receive this training. They are far less likely to receive these opportunities than youth in more affluent, suburban areas," Ms. Knezevich said.

The Gwen's Girls work readiness program, created in 2009, helps girls ages 15 to 18 learn about what interests them, how to set goals and how to obtain those goals.

"We have professional women talk to them about their careers, personal experiences and backgrounds, then the girls get to shadow in the workplace, participate in job and college tours, and learn how to present themselves," she said. Girls participating in the program receive help with writing resumes, applying to college and learning how to interview for jobs.

The grant from Duquesne Light will allow Gwen's Girls to expand the work readiness programming to serve 40 young women in high poverty, high crime areas of Allegheny County.

One of the strengths of Gwen's Girls, according to Ms. Knezevich, is engaging the community in many of its programs.

"We have corporate groups who come in, and students from Vandergrift and Bowling Green University

came in for alternative spring break,” she said. Many local college students also volunteer.

More than 1,000 volunteers assist the 38 staff members. Last year, 225 young women were provided services by Gwen’s Girls.

Now in its 13th year, many of the women who were served in the past by Gwen’s Girls keep in touch with the staff.

“We have girls who call the group home on Mother’s Day to talk to the staff. It is striking how they keep in touch with us through the good and bad times,” Ms. Knezevich said.

Many of those young women are now successful themselves.

“We have one who is working on her master’s degree, and we see how others are advancing in their careers,” she said.

Ms. Knezevich said she takes great pride in the job.

“Being part of a wonderful team that helps transform the lives of these young women is amazing,” she said.

**LYNN KNEZEVICH**

**AGE:** 61

**HOMETOWN:** Squirrel Hill

**OCCUPATION:** Executive director of Gwen’s Girls

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor's and master's degrees, University of Pittsburgh

**FAMILY:** Husband, Marc; daughters, Alison and Liana

**WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOU:** Faith, family and friends

**FIRST JOB:** Concession stand at Clairton Park

**WHEN YOU WERE A KID, YOU WANTED TO BE:** A nun and a teacher

**HOBBIES:** Cooking, film and theater

**READING MATERIAL ON YOUR NIGHTSTAND:** Lots of unread magazines

**WHAT'S PLAYING ON YOUR TV:** "House of Cards," "House of Lies"

**WHAT'S ON YOUR PLAYLIST:** Oldies

**FANTASY CELEBRITY DINNER DATE:** Pope Francis

**FANTASY PARTNER ON "DANCING WITH THE STARS":** Billy Porter

**WHO WOULD PLAY YOU IN A MOVIE ABOUT YOUR LIFE:** Frances McDormand

**PEOPLE WOULD BE SURPRISED TO KNOW:** "I'm an open book."

**GUILTY PLEASURE:** Sugar

**IF YOU HAD IT TO DO ALL OVER, YOU WOULD:** “Nothing different; no regrets.”

**FAVORITE SPOT IN THE WORLD:** “My grandmother’s house.”

**MOST EMBARRASSING MOMENT:** “Too many to name.”

**BEST USE OF A \$100 GIFT CARD:** Coffee, tea and spices

**PROUDEST MOMENT SO FAR:** “Being the mother of two wonderfully kind, compassionate women.”

**WHAT’S ON YOUR BUCKET LIST:** Grandchildren

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