

## #LetsMakeASEEN: Gwen's Girls

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By Natalie Bencivenga / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

As a Pittsburgh police beat officer starting in the 1970s, Gwen Elliott witnessed many horrors -- poverty, violence, drug abuse, sexual assault. Women and girls doing whatever they needed to do to survive. Their circumstances weighed heavily on her heart and mind. She realized there was a need for an organization that focused on bringing together community resources for women and girls.

That goal was realized in 2002 when the Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth and Families funded the creation of the nonprofit Gwen's Girls. Elliott, who died in 2007, was the first African-American female Pittsburgh officer in 1973, and she became the first woman promoted to city commander. Her vision lives on with Gwen's Girls.

Nakia Beasley, development and communications coordinator of Gwen's Girls, wanted to be a part of this organization. "Girls become mothers," she said. "They become the decision makers, and we need to help them make healthy and positive choices for themselves and their families."

Gwen's Girls, which operates in a former school on the North Side, provides services and programs to benefit women across the city. There is a focus on case management as a part of its prevention program that seeks to help girls who are involved with CYF services as well as girls in juvenile detention.

After-school programs focus on self-care, self-awareness, career development and mentoring to encourage participants to build the skills they need to become self-sufficient. What makes Gwen's Girls particularly vital is its residential program, which serves as an emergency shelter and short-term living facility. A foster care program also works toward placing girls in long-term care if they come from abusive environments. And, because many of the girls have children, they are counseled on how to become positive role models.

"We are very careful as to whom we hire here at Gwen's Girls," said Lynn Knezevich, executive director. "We find that girls respond best to a nurturing, supportive environment. We want the staff to also be role models for our girls and to accept them for who they are."

The organization is looking for more educational support and new computers for its lab. A newer focus at Gwen's Girls is to engage young women and girls in local art, theater and music.

Gwen's Girls is planning a golf outing Sept. 15 as a fundraiser, which the organization hopes will help fill some of the funding gaps left by a lack of public resources. For details: [www.gwensgirls.org](http://www.gwensgirls.org)

Together, #LetsMakeASEEN!