For two alumnae, using their voices to help women who don’t have a voice has not only inspired those whose lives they’ve touched, it has also given them a true purpose. Their stories are yet another example of how a small group of women can make a tremendous difference in the lives of others.
KAREN HANSON '08 MA
AFT
ER MANY YEARS of my life being centered around the raising of my children and their activities, I felt a strong pull to resume the raising of myself. As my children grew into young adulthood, the requirement of my time naturally lessened and my commitment to and delight in gifting the world with healthy, happy, productive children coincided and sometimes collided with an increasing desire to discover the depths of my person, my passion and my purpose in the world.

My burgeoning spirituality became a focal point in my life and I discovered communities of women interested in consciously awakening to their lives purposes through prayer and meditation, study and alternative therapies. As the necessity to move out into the world became stronger, I noticed my dreams and guidance centered around going back to school and I began to feel the nudge of what I was to study.

For years, I had been drawn to the Ursuline campus where I and my daughters attended some classes run by the Sisters. On many occasions I arrived on campus early in the day with a bucket and garden tools to tend to the weeds that were growing along the driveway. During breaks, I walked the labyrinth. I just wanted to be in the energy of the campus. It was natural therefore for me to consider Ursuline as the place where I wanted to study and through prayer and crazy synchronicities, it became clear to me that I was meant to study in the Graduate Ministry Program.

I enjoyed the challenge of such intellectual stimulation after so many years away from school and the opportunity to explore academically the scripture and tradition of Catholicism. I discovered the ways I felt that our religious tradition resonated with my experientially-based spirituality. Also, through the study of other traditions, I was able to look at my own with more understanding and clarity.
I FELT FREE to bring all of myself into the program in both conventional and unconventional ways. It was in the master’s program that I found my voice, shared my experiences and my thoughts. I was affirmed and challenged and I, in turn, affirmed and challenged others, always with the understanding that my true self was growing and learning and exploring ways of emerging and being.

After graduating in 2008, I was ready to be launched into the world, but the Divine did not agree. I continued my study of religion and spirituality on my own and allowed the seed of a dream to be planted. I traveled to India on an immersion experience with International Partners in Mission, a Cleveland-based nonprofit organization and fell in love with the project partners with whom they worked. I continued to return to India and deepened my relationship with the people.

After several trips and much prayer and received guidance, I began an organization called Girls for the World. Girls for the World is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to the growth, development and empowerment of girls as powerful agents of social change in their communities and in the world. The goal of Girls for the World is to empower girls through a journey of self-discovery that sparks their imaginations and builds confidence and leadership skills through discussion, art, music, dance and drama – the same journey of self-discovery that brought me to this point.

The program focuses on adolescent girls (13-21) from poverty-stricken areas and is a process-oriented program of self-awareness and leadership building that enables girls to understand and acknowledge that their inner strength and gifts, along with their creative abilities and vision, can effect radical change.

The methodology used in our workshops centers on the inward journey that results in outward action. We believe that building a solid sense of self provides the foundation from which leaders emerge and action in the community and in the world are natural derivatives. The process is guided with the use of creatively-stimulating activities and are conducted within a circle of equality, not hierarchy. All girls, their chaperone-mothers and facilitators gather in circle as equals and share in the activities and processing of the exercises.

Girls for the World “Imagine being...” workshops were launched in slum areas in Western India in 2011. During our five days of art, music, dancing, sharing, dreaming, learning and exploring, the girls discovered their gifts and claimed their voices. They were pure magic! In addition to the workshops, we offer community health events at which nurses and public health workers discuss various girl-centered health issues. At the same time, we offer them some fun through fitness activities and a healthy snack, including milk and bananas – a rare treat for them.

Girls for the World continues its work in India as well as in the United States and recently traveled to Peru to work with Shipibo tribal communities along the Amazon. The characteristics that exemplify the Ursuline identity, “Values, Voice, Vision,” are strongly embedded within the leadership model we utilize in our program curriculum. We discuss and generate activities around those values that we believe make a good leader. We use our imaginations to envision ways in which we can implement our desires for our families, our communities, our country and our world. Also, we focus a great deal of attention on the girls finding their voices. We practice speaking and sharing our thoughts, ideas and feelings, initially in the sanctity of our circle. As I was encouraged to and discovered my values, voice and vision at Ursuline, we in our Girls for the World circle, always with joy and much laughter, encourage one another to share these gifts with the world.

If you would like to become involved in Girls for the World, please email Karen Hanson at khanson@girlsfortheworld.org. or you can visit www.girlsfortheworld.org.