

Community Spotlight - Girls Inc. of St. Louis (February 2021)



Inspiring all girls to be strong, smart and bold By Paula Miller, UMSL graduate student

This month's feature is UMSL community partner Girls Incorporated of St. Louis, and an interview with Cheryl Jones, the CEO and President of this nonprofit organization. Learn more about Girls Inc. of St. Louis at <https://www.girlsincstl.org/>.

"Girls, Inc. is by far one of the greatest opportunities I've had in my lifetime, and I've had many," stated Ms. Cheryl Jones, CEO and President of Girls Incorporated of St. Louis. "We're doing all the things that we're supposed to do, connecting with partners connecting with schools." Hearing the laughter, feeling the energy and inquisitiveness of the girls is the heartbeat of Girls Inc. according to Jones.

Each day when the girls arrive from their schools, they are directed to activities such as the after-school learning extension programs in a variety of subjects including math, science, piano, and dance. "Every program that we have is designed to inspire all girls to be strong, smart, and bold," Jones said.

Girls Inc. promotes diverse extension learning opportunities, which helps to unite and expand community engagement. In addition to offering after school programming, Girls Inc. offers virtual summer programs including transportation and outreach for Grades K-12. They currently serve over 9,000 girls from 72 area schools.

"Most of the girls that come to us are from our community, and how we unite them is, we want to make sure that they're also community servants. And what I mean by that is we have service-learning opportunities where we want our girls to not just focus on themselves but on how to build a better community outside the walls... We have our own community, and we have character development and values that we all really try to live up to. But we also know that any great person is only as great as the

community they serve. So we asked our girls to step out of themselves and out of their communities and try to impact the larger community

Though 2020 was a challenging year, Girls Inc. pivoted well with the impact of Covid-19 according to Jones. “We made sure that we had food for our girls for two weeks. And we knew that other agencies could do it far better than us. Then we started doing virtual programming. And when I say we started we had an initial TikTok, an Instagram and a YouTube page.” Ms. Jones also noted that 2020 has been their best year financially. “We want to make sure that our girls have all of the things they need to go on and be future leaders. Our whole goal is really just trying to meet kids where they are and take them where they want to be. That’s it!”

Girls Inc. of St. Louis was established in 1981 as the Girls Club of Souldard offering programming in an all-girl environment. “I think the world about Girls Inc.” noted Dr. Keith W. Miller, the Orthwein Endowed Professor for Lifelong Learning in the Sciences at the UMSL, in a recent interview. “Girl Inc. has to do with life-long learning in the Sciences and I got involved with them because they were very interested in science, technology and math...I went over there and they welcomed me with open arms. They've been wonderful partners and we've done lots of different programs with them. For example, I recruited UMSL students and did a tech day. They do after school activities and a big summer program. During the year, we would bring robots, do math and other activities for about six weeks for each age group.”

One of the major summer programs offered through Girls Inc. in partnership with UMSL is the Eureka program and each girl participates in the program for 6 weeks every summer for 5 years. In the first summer, a cohort of about 20 students come to UMSL and Dr. Miller and a team of colleagues and students work with the girls for 2 hours each day on STEM activities. In subsequent summers, the cohort gets experience at other universities and then do internships. According to Dr. Miller, “The program has been wildly successful with 90% of the girls who have gone through the first cohort being accepted into their college of choice and about 70% have gone into STEM majors.” He also noted the importance of more people becoming involved in the program. “Modeling and mentoring--I think both are really important—that the girls can see people who have made it/have succeeded, and those same people can help them along, that’s a dream come true!”

Dr. Miller expressed his deep admiration for the work that Ms. Cheryl Jones has done since taking the helm at Girls Inc. of St. Louis. He noted that in both 2020 and in 2015, under Ms. Jones’ leadership and mentorship, Girls Inc. of St. Louis received national recognition as "The Affiliate of the Year " Additionally Girls Inc. of St. Louis was credited by Girls Inc. national leadership for forging the relationship with Enterprise Holdings that yielded a \$5 million donation late last year as recently reported by [The St. Louis American](#). The St. Louis Girls Inc. affiliate is set to receive 10% of the gift for work in the St. Louis community.

Girls Inc. of St. Louis will be celebrating their 40th year as an organization this year and will be hosting the annual Girls Inc. of St. Louis’ Strong, Smart, and Bold (SSB) Luncheon/Fundraiser on November 11, 2021. Girls Inc. is expanding their footprint in St. Louis to serve more communities and they are looking for partners, investors for future girl generations, and volunteers. For further information about Girls Inc. of St. Louis, visit <https://www.girlsincstl.org/>. To register for after-school programming, visit the <https://www.girlsincstl.org/about3> website, or call (314) 385-8088.