The Sisterhood is born

In early 2012, a coffee business started by teen boys from the Cedar-Riverside community of African and East African immigrants in Minneapolis prompted interest and discussions among a group of teen girls from the same community. They, too, dreamed of creating and leading something in the community. Soon, the idea behind the Sisterhood Boutique, a thrift store, was born.

In December 2012, the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota awarded the Pillsbury United Communities/Brian Coyle Community Center a $5,000 girlsBEST Fund planning grant. The grant was to fund the research and development of a business plan for the boutique.

Dear Friends,

At the state Capitol on Mother’s Day (May 11), Minnesota made history. Before a packed room of legislators, advocates, families and media, Gov. Mark Dayton signed the Women’s Economic Security Act of 2014 into law. Truly, a new day has dawned toward increased economic security for the state’s women and families, and all Minnesotans.

Each leader who spoke after the signing – Senate President Sandy Pappas, House Speaker Paul Thissen, Rep. Carly Melin, and Commissioner Kevin Lindsey (MN Dept. of Human Rights) – praised the contributions and leadership provided by the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota. We are proud that our economics research on the status of women and girls served as the basis for the legislation. For details about the new law and our leadership role to pass it, please visit WFMN.ORG.

At the Women’s Foundation, we know that building pathways to prosperity for women begins when they are girls – and this is what our girlsBEST Fund is all about. As you will read in this issue of Equality Update, the Sisterhood of the Traveling Scarf girls are building those pathways to the strong, prosperous futures they want for themselves and for their community.

With your continued support, a future of opportunity and equality for all will become real. Thank you for being a valued partner in this vision.

Warmly,

Lee Roper-Batker,
President & CEO

The Sisterhood Boutique staff (l-r): Nasteho Farah (17; junior, South High School, Mpls.), Laki Jama (18; junior, Lincoln High School, Mpls.), Hodan Abokar (19; freshman, Minneapolis Community & Technical College), Saida Hussen (16; sophomore, South High School, Mpls.), Halima (Sisterhood mannequin), Khadra Fiqi (17; senior, South High School, Mpls., also earning college credits at MCTC), Anab Jama (22), and Samira Ali (19).
Funding a dream

In June 2013, the Women’s Foundation awarded the program a $15,000 implementation grant and the all-girl, girl-led Sisterhood of the Traveling Scarf (Sisterhood) program was off the ground and running.

The grant provided funding for education and training, internship wages, rental space, equipment, and other expenses. Next, Chang recruited girls from the advisory board to intern. Interns start at $7.25 per hour, and spend 11 hours per week in business or entrepreneurial classes and training. After three months, each girl receives a raise to $8.25 per hour and works 12 hours per week in the boutique.

In late 2013, the Sisterhood located a space at the African Development Center (Minneapolis) for the boutique. They purchased the equipment they would need to run the business. Next, the merchandise. A call went out to the community for donations of clothing, shoes, and accessories—plus many, many colorful scarves.

Obstacles, setbacks, support

One obstacle the Sisterhood faced was a cultural stigma in the African and east African community surrounding thrift stores and secondhand clothing. They met with community elders and explained what the program and boutique meant to them, and encouraged the community to shop there.

A significant setback stemmed from a deadly explosion and fire in the neighborhood in January 2014. Donations for a clothing drive for families displaced by the fire were stored in the same facility as the Sisterhood’s donated merchandise.

As a result, a portion of the Sisterhood’s stock was mistakenly given away. With opening day only a few weeks away and merchandise now low, the girls had to get creative, and quickly. They made announcements at their high schools and through other community organizations, telling their story and calling for boutique donations.

The response was tremendous. Donations of items and volunteer services poured in. Even the teen boys behind the coffee business helped tag clothes and solicit donations. “We had the boys tell us they wanted to get more involved. But then we said, ‘Girls only!’” recalled the girls, laughing.

From worried to “Wow!”

Grand opening day, February 28, 2014, arrived. The girls were nervous. Would the cultural thrift-store stigma keep the community away? Would the grand opening—and the Sisterhood—be successful?

It was. Nearly 200 people came to shop, show support, and bring donated goods. The media came, too, which garnered lots of positive press and visibility.

“We thought, wow, the community and the press took us seriously!” said Khadra Fiqi, a senior at South High School in Minneapolis.

“Of course, we took it seriously ourselves, working hard. But we can’t do a lot without the support of the community and organizations, like the Women’s Foundation.”

“It’s uplifting…”

Widespread community support for the boutique blossomed into a donation of rent-free retail space from Fairview Health Services. The new, larger space is located at 2200 Riverside Ave., directly across the street from Augsburg College. Students at the college recently held a donations-drive to welcome the Sisterhood Boutique to the neighborhood.

“When you are from an immigrant community, you look different. It’s empowering when people and women of all colors and backgrounds come together to support you,” said Khadra. “It’s uplifting, and it signifies unity and hope.”

The boutique’s relaunch in its new location is on June 20. ■