LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friends,

A recent The New York Times article, “How to Get More Women to Join the Debate,” highlighted how women’s voices are often silenced in online media. Solutions to the complex problems facing our world require equal opportunity to raise our voices.

On February 6, Minnesota Urban Debate League (MNUDL), a girlsBEST Fund grantee, provided such an opportunity. It hosted the first-in-the-nation Girls Celebration Debate Tournament at Augsburg College. There, 40 girls from nine Twin Cities’ schools debated Ocean Policy.

Why is debate important? It builds critical thinking skills, teamwork, and leadership. In fact, over 60 percent of Congress report participation in high school or college debate.

Through MNUDL, over 300 girls are finding their voices and building the skills they will need to be tomorrow’s leaders. And together, our collective resources fuel this work.

Here at the Women’s Foundation in the coming year, we will raise our voices to call for equal opportunity on national stages.

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Then this fall, a dream of mine will come true! In March, I will participate on a United Nations’ panel about how women’s foundations around the world are changing harmful norms of femininity and masculinity to better advance gender equality.

Through this program, MNUDL works to empower girls to become engaged learners, critical thinkers, and active citizens. “We want them to find their voices and be good self-advocates, and eventually, leaders for their community,” stressed Amy Cram Helwich.

Two shining examples of this are MNUDL alumni, Tiana Bellamy and Dua Saleh.

Graduates of Central High School in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, both now attend Augsburg College (Minneapolis), where MNUDL is officed and where it holds tournaments and a debate camp every summer. Former debate teammates, current friends, and soon-to-be roommates, the two young women attribute their time in debate to shaping them into who they are today.

“After I joined debate, I developed a stronger sense of self,” said Saleh, who moved to St. Paul at the age of five after her family fled Sudan as refugees of war. “I enjoyed being able to see people who looked like me engaged in intellectual conversations about issues that directly affected me.”

As a middle schooler, I absolutely hated public speaking. I was the shyest kid you would ever meet in your entire life,” laughed Bellamy, a St. Paul native who joined debate in the 8th grade because she knew shyness would be detrimental to her future. “Everyone knows women have to work 10 times harder to be taken seriously. I knew that for people to understand where I was coming from, I needed to be firm and secure in what I was presenting and saying to people.”

Saleh and Bellamy, along with another debatee, dubbed themselves the Powerpuff Girls, after the cartoon superheroes popular in their childhoods. This nickname stuck through their time in debate and is particularly fitting. Much like the Powerpuff Girls who were always defending their city, both young women are strong leaders in their community.

Saleh, who is majoring in sociology and women’s studies in her second year at Augsburg, is a core member of both Augsburg’s Pan-Afrikan Student Union and the NAACP St. Paul Youth and Collegiate Branch.

Bellamy, an Urban Studies major in her first year at Augsburg, is a core member of both those groups, as well. She also secured a guaranteed four-year internship through Augsburg’s Bonner Leaders Program, a social justice-focused service initiative where she will gain leadership

Warmly,

Lee Roper-Batker, President & CEO
experience working with nonprofit community organizations.

In her first semester, Bellamy interned with Minneapolis’ Harrison Neighborhood Association, working on transit equity and renter’s rights. This spring, she will intern with MNUDL to train the coaches and teachers who facilitate the school debate programs.

An evaluation done during the 2013-14 school year by Minneapolis Public Schools revealed that students who participate in debate clearly benefit. “We were the first out-of-school program to move the needle on Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) scores,” Cram Helwich said, citing the study’s finding that MNUDL debaters gained 3.34 points over their peers on the MCA Reading test.

Not only do MNUDL’s debaters benefit academically, but debate can be an antidote to self-esteem issues that often develop for girls during the teenage years. Girl debaters reported an increase in confidence, teamwork skills, problem-solving, college readiness and career exploration, and finding a supportive community as the best aspects of participation. “Not only does debate create community, but it offers a lot of connections to other women who have gone through this. It creates a support network for your goals,” said Bellamy.

It also opens doors. “Debate is one of the first things colleges look for,” relayed Bellamy. She was offered a number of debate scholarships from colleges across the country before settling on Augsburg. The college makes attending a four-year college a reality for debaters through its Promise Scholarship.

Students who participate in MNUDL for three or more years in high school, hold a cumulative GPA of 3.25 or higher, have an ACT score of 20 or higher, and are Pell grant eligible will receive the total cost of tuition for all four years of college. “We have a few students each year who are awarded the scholarship,” Cram Helwich said proudly.

While doors have opened and debate has become more diverse on the local circuit due to MNUDL’s efforts, “The national circuit is not diverse by race, income, or even gender,” Cram Helwich reported. Most of the top speaker awards continue to go to young men, and the majority of debate judges and coaches are men. In 2014, Bellamy and her partner Ayaan Natala were the first all-black female team to qualify for the Tournament of Champions since 1989.

“Urban Debate League, specifically MNUDL, really makes an effort to promote diversity,” Bellamy stressed. “We’re trying to open something that’s really a white, male-centric sport and turn it into an opportunity that everybody can participate in.”

Last spring, MNUDL started a Spanish-speaking debate program and held a pilot tournament; 40 kids from five schools participated. The goal for the Spanish-speaking program this spring is to hold four tournaments and expand to 80 students across eight schools. MNUDL is also planning to pilot a Somali debate program this May and is working with community leaders to ensure the debate is authentic to the Somali culture.

“There is more work to do,” said Cram Helwich, but she has seen firsthand how debate can transform lives. Take the Powerpuff Girls and their promising futures. “It’s where the magic begins.”