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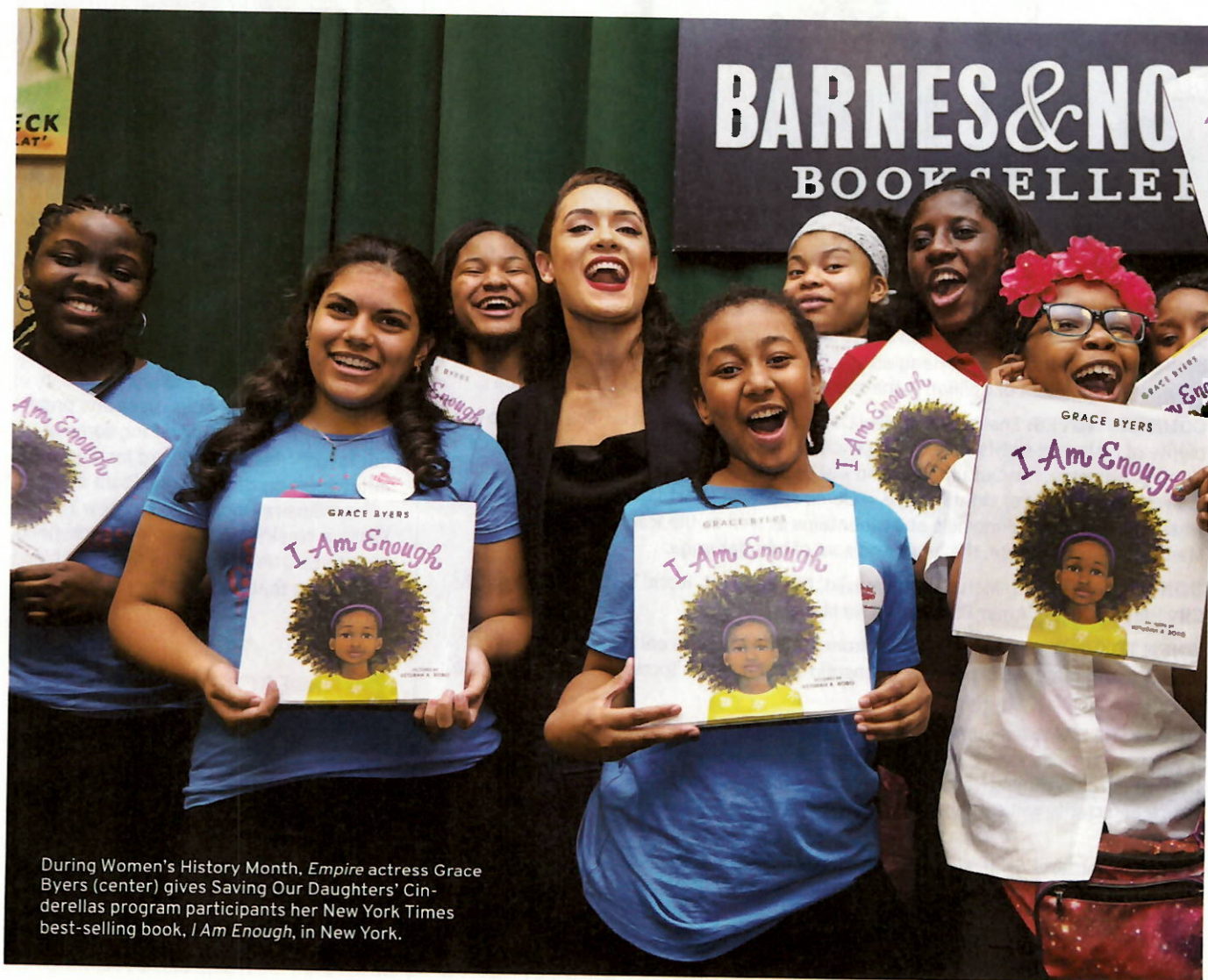


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# EMPOWERING GIRLS TO WITHSTAND CYBERBULLYING

Arts program diffuses the negative effects of social media

by CURTIS BENJAMIN



During Women's History Month, *Empire* actress Grace Byers (center) gives Saving Our Daughters' Cinderellas program participants her New York Times best-selling book, *I Am Enough*, in New York.

GIRLS GO THROUGH MORE CHALLENGES regarding bullying from their peers on social media than their male counterparts.

Advances in technology have broadened the reach of making fun of others to a visceral and viral dynamic that is toxic to the social culture and well-being of today's youth. This is especially true for girls of color who are navigating adolescence at the intersections of peer pressure, self-esteem, gender roles and identity, and racial identity and representation.

According to a 2017 survey conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, Black teens are the most active on social media and messaging apps. Often, the imagery portrayed through ads and other digital platforms is not culturally representative of the diverse and natural beauty that girls and women of color exhibit.

"Social media influences the minds of young girls to their detriment," says Sanaa Hamri, executive director/producer of Fox's *Empire*. "It tells them what beauty is and what is supposedly 'perfect.' ... Saving Our Daughters creates the environment where we can teach our daughters the truth about social media; how to create content that inspires and also how images are distorted. I am passionate about [ensuring] young girls are taught how to use social media and not getting snagged by the false pretenses and the fickle nature of it."

Saving Our Daughters is a 501(c)(3) organization based in Atlanta and works with girls from multicultural backgrounds through theater, film, culinary arts and literacy. The mission is to help them overcome the many obstacles they may face growing up, such as bullying (cyber, gossip, face-to-face) and other self-esteem slayers.

In 2014, the organization launched the Saving Our Cinderellas Performing Arts on Broadway Program with the Broadway musical *Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella*, in which actress Keke Palmer became the first African-American actress to play the famous princess on Broadway. The program encourages girls by using performing arts to help deter bullying.

Celebrities on television and film have joined the cause: Grace Byers of *Empire* and *The Gifted*; Shanola Hampton of Showtime's *Shameless*; Yara Shahidi of *black-ish*; Storm Reid of Disney's *A Wrinkle in Time*; the Oscar-nominated Quvenzhané Wallis; and Eris Baker of *This Is Us*.

In New York City, the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change in Harlem has zero tolerance for bullying. The school's initiatives spurred development of female mentoring groups such as SOBRO's Girls Group, Crown Your Beauty, She's the Movement and Saving Our Daughters' My Celebrity Book Club.

"We encourage our girls [to know] that our school is a safe space where they can speak to anyone in regard to how they are feeling," says Princila Amoakoa-Omorebokhae, parent coordinator and community partnership liaison.

The Cleveland-based MyCom Youth Development Initiative aims to engage via education, out-of-school opportunities, advocacy and transitions. Through a neighborhood-based model, the initiative provides services to 20 neighborhoods. During its 10



Actress and singer Keke Palmer, the first African-American Cinderella on Broadway, surprises program participants in New Orleans.

years, MyCom has worked on several issues, and bullying has always been at the forefront. It has used digital media to help young people express their concerns by creating videos and movies, and has sponsored teen summits, community conversations and small-group programming, serving more than 7,000.

"We recognize that youths who are bullied are more likely to feel disconnected from school and not enjoy [it], have lower academic outcomes—including lower attendance and completion rates—lack quality friendships, have low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness and isolation. In extreme cases, have a higher risk of suicide. Through our partnerships and services, we seek to be change agents to ensure all young people feel safe, respected and are prepared to become successful adults in their communities," says MyCom Network Director Kasey Morgan.

At Willa Cather Elementary School in the East Garfield Park neighborhood of Chicago, mentorship was needed to deter bullying and other issues impacting the choices girls were making and their educations. Retired principal Hattie King teamed with Palmer, who is from Harvey, Illinois, to visit the school. The actress/recording artist served as an inspiration and role model for students to rise above the negative influences. Led by current principal Wanda Carey and other administrators, the group became known as the "Cinderellas."

These influential programs teach the power of words, teasing vs. bullying, assertive vs. aggressive, and coping skills needed to diffuse and defend against bullying. And more important, they empower girls to be confident, discover their gifts and passion, and become mindful of their worth and inner strength, which makes it more difficult to be a victim of bullying or want to be a bully.

*Curtis Benjamin, along with his wife, Debbie, is the co-founder of Saving Our Daughters. The organization stands in tribute to their daughter Illiss Marie, who lost her battle to cancer at age 12.*