

capturing confidence

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www.capturingconfidenceproject.com

Sincere thanks to:

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I was rejected, excluded, psychologically battered, and emotionally scarred. I was ostracized and taken advantage of: I was the girl who had no one to sit with in the cafeteria, the one who lent people money and was never reimbursed. During lunch I often stood in the small, decrepit phone booth, crying profusely to my mother. This musty, dark space was the only place to hide during these dreadful forty-five minutes. It was my escape, to avoid the awkwardness of sitting alone, and it gave me the opportunity to tell my compassionate mother which girl had called me fat or who told me my shirt was not the newest cool shade of bubblegum pink from the Limited Too.

5th through 8th grade were the most difficult in my life thus far. Although there is no way I will ever be able to erase the pain that I endured during this time, I was able to overcome the adversity that I encountered and eventually transform into a confident young woman.

My family encouraged me to take on activities that made me feel better about myself. I began to explore art and the creative process. Touching paintbrush to canvas or snapping the shutter release of a camera enabled me to enter into a zone of complete concentration. I was able to focus solely on the colors and composition of what I was creating. Turning to art as a means of expressing myself became a way to deal with the problems I was facing at school. I was able to enter into my own world, a world in which I appreciated my positive attributes and became proud of who I was. I was eventually able to rid myself of the catty nonsense that I experienced everyday at school. I had found an activity that made me feel good about myself, something in which I genuinely took interest. In fact, I probably would not be at the University of Michigan School of Art + Design today if it weren't for what I went through during these years.

Eventually, I began to understand what these girls were doing to me and I was able to change the way I felt. I joined the tennis team and acquainted myself with girls who didn't act as though they were twelve going on twenty. I was able to completely change my situation.

Through my IP project, I wanted to tell girls my story and let them know that they can be strong enough to not have to endure psychological bullying. I wanted to share the therapeutic process of art with them, and allow them to express their feelings in a safe, nonverbal way by participating in a creative activity. I also wanted them to see that they are

not alone if they do, in fact, experience negative feelings that are the result of being isolated and excluded by other girls. Simultaneously, my hope was to raise the self-esteem of these girls, something that tends to be lacking during the years from late elementary through middle school.

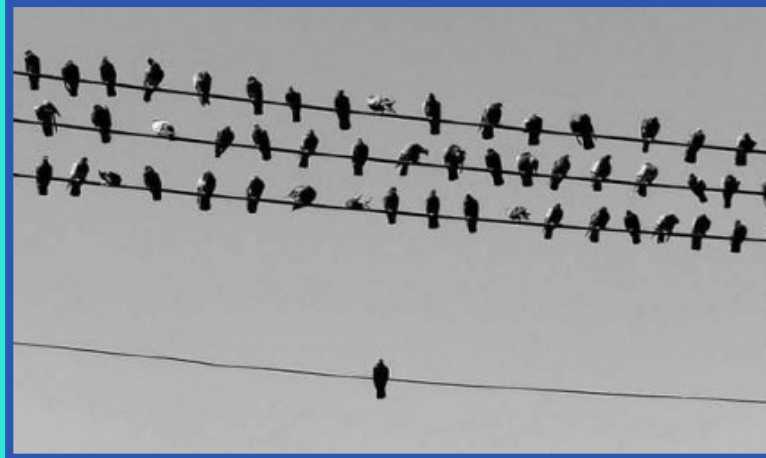
This project was multi-faceted, and involved a few different components. The main part of this project was a workshop that I developed, which I facilitated among three groups of 5th-8th grade girls in the Ann Arbor area: A 5th grade class at King Elementary School, and two 6th-8th grade Girl Scout Troops. The workshop began with introducing an activity that involved photography. This allowed the girls to become creatively engaged, something that helped me so much when I was in middle school. I have always found it fascinating that with just the click of a button, one is able to capture what they are seeing at that very moment. Photographs are also powerful tools that can express several emotions in both their subject matter and their composition.

Prior to leading the workshop, I had the girls capture six adjectives with a camera. I gave each group of girls a period of about 3 weeks to take the photographs, and had each of them email me their images. The only rule was that the photographs could not include people's faces. The adjectives I gave them were: excluded, lonely, scared, satisfied, confident, and happy.

Hello!

My name is Carly and I am asking you to participate in a creative project to get you to think about different emotions and feelings.

This activity involves taking 6 photographs on your own time. We will then meet together on March 19th to discuss all of the images you took. I look forward to seeing what you come up with and meeting with you to discuss your photos!



Photographs are very powerful tools which can show various emotions. Sometimes with a click of a button, a photo can create a mood or a feeling. For example, what adjective do you think the above photograph feels like?

Please use your camera to capture the following adjectives:

excluded *lonely* *scared*
satisfied *confident* *happy*

The only rule is that **people's faces cannot be included in your photographs.**

If you could email me your 6 photos after you have taken them by **March 5th**, that would be great. Only do this if your parents have given you permission. My email address is **cbgraf@umich.edu**. Also, *be sure to label each file with which adjective you are representing.*

Thanks so much!
Carly

Handout with instructions for project. This handout was given to each group of girls I worked with.

I believe that this activity was a great way for girls this age to really think about how they were feeling when they experienced these words. I also included positive adjectives that are often associated with self-confidence so that this was not just a negative experience for the girls. Talking about the photos that portrayed the positive adjectives also became an entry point into a discussion about what made these girls feel satisfied, confident and happy.

In her book *Something to Draw On*, Carol Ross mentions the importance of making images that depict feeling good and confident in comparison to situations they find difficult (Ross 44). I agree with Ross and think that sharing what makes the girls feel confident, happy and satisfied is just as important as talking about how they feel when they are excluded, lonely or scared. Perhaps one girl tried an activity that another girl in the group said made her feel confident and good about herself. Maybe this was dancing? Maybe it was skiing, or playing field hockey? Hopefully the girls were able to try an activity that allowed them to find an outlet to help them; similar to the way I used art to help me.

I also hoped that while taking these photos, the girls were able to completely enter into a creative way of thinking and viewing things. In Cathy Malchiodi's *Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children*, she makes clear that young adults experiencing relational aggression are "often unable to verbally express their feelings of fear, worthlessness, confusion, and even rage. They often internalize these feelings as a way of coping with their daily trauma" (Malchiodi 147). I know that this is what I did when I was an adolescent, and I believe that expressing some of these feelings by capturing a photograph of what the feeling "looks" like is a helpful process. Malchiodi also states that, "Creative approaches alone, or in conjunction with school-based prevention/intervention programs, offer a viable means to minimize the impact of bullying behavior. Giving students a venue in which to safely explore internalized feelings of traumatization helps them become able to vocalize their pain, gain support and strategies, and learn to approach new bully situations from an empowered stance" (Malchiodi 159). Hopefully my workshop was able to give the girls with whom I worked this "venue."

The second aspect of this workshop involved a component of sharing, which I feel was an essential way to show these girls that they are not alone if they do experience any of the feelings associated with relational aggression. Even if girls were not being "bullied," everyone has at some point experienced feelings of exclusion, loneliness or fear. I had the girls share

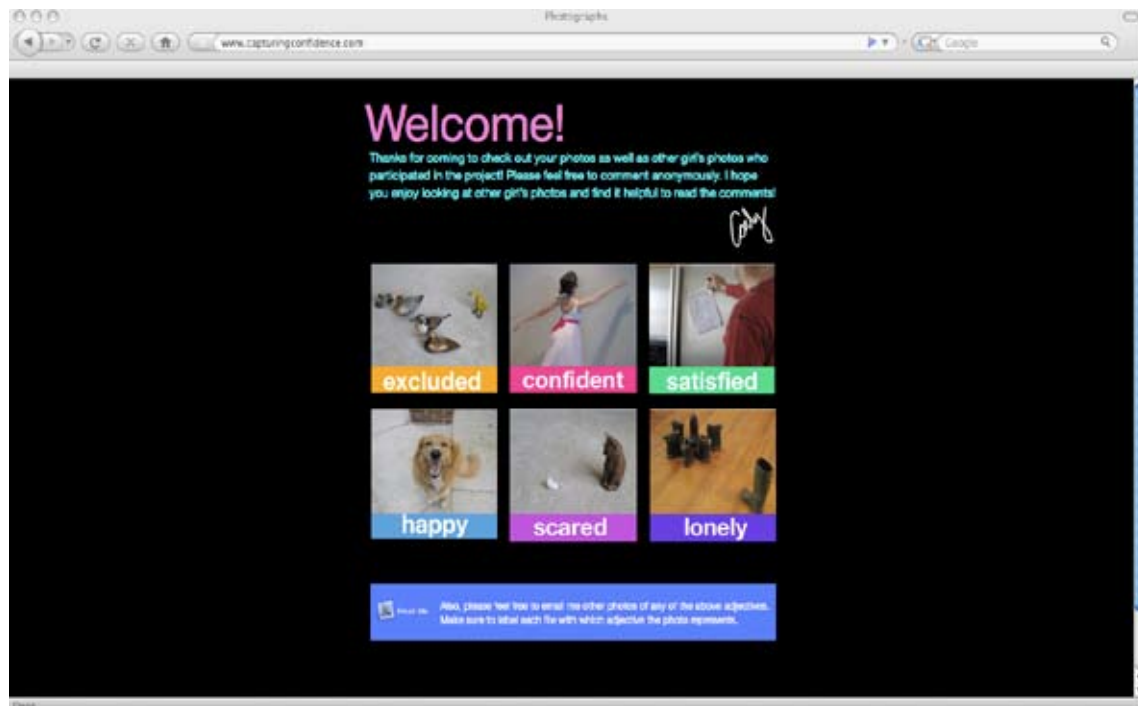
what it is they were thinking when they took their photos, and why they took them.

The girls did not feel intimidated to talk about the feelings evoked by their photographs since they were talking about a hypothetical situation; it is easier to talk about objects in a photograph rather than oneself. For example, in the workshop I did with the Fifth Graders at King Elementary School in Ann Arbor, one girl started talking about her photograph of bananas, which she thought depicted the word “excluded.” The girl said, “all of the bananas are all ripe and one of them is rotten, so it’s like that one banana is excluded because no one would want to eat it.” Another girl then chimed in, “it’s like if everyone’s in the popular crowd and you’re this girl who’s new, that’s how you’d feel.” It was interesting how the girls could start talking about this real life situation merely by talking about a picture of bananas. The conversation that arose from talking about this photograph could really help a girl listening to it see that she is not the only one, if she has ever experienced a similar feeling of being excluded.



Photo taken by 5th grade Girl representing the word excluded.

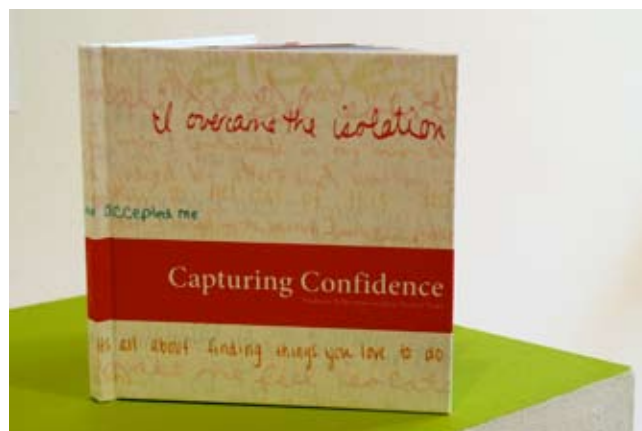
The third piece of my project was an interactive website/blog that is used as a tool for the girls to view their photos, as well as the photos of the other girls' who participated in the project, and to anonymously post comments. This was another way for these girls to see that they were not alone if they were experiencing any feelings associated with relational aggression. Perhaps a girl was able to view a specific photo that she really connected to. There are different questions posed under each adjective. For example, under lonely, there is a question that says, "when do you feel most lonely?" In contrast, under happy it says, "what do you do to make yourself happy?" Hopefully through this, girls can get tips from other girls about what makes them feel positive. This way the girls can see how they might be able to make themselves feel better if they ever experience loneliness or being excluded. In Rachel Simmons' *Odd Girl Out*, she says, "Join the newspaper, take a workshop, join a team, take an art class, volunteer, get a job. Join a chat room of girls online. Try not to curl into a ball or under your blanket, or at least not all day, every day. Finding a different community of people can make the difference. Find what you love to do. It doesn't necessarily have to be with others. When you find what you love, you come closer to finding yourself" (Simmons 257). I want to stress to these girls just how important it really is to find things they love to do.



Homepage of www.capturingconfidence.com

The last piece of this project was a book that included the personal reflections of women my age. I collected these writings in two different ways. The first way was through leading a workshop with some of my friends, in which we shared our stories. It was beneficial for all the women in the group to hear that they were not the only ones going through these hardships at the time. We all were reassured and comforted when we realized that it was not uncommon to sit alone in the cafeteria or be teased on a daily basis. It was so interesting for my peers and me to hear about the similar tough experiences we shared in elementary and middle school, since we now see each other as confident and successful individuals. In addition, I sent many emails to women I know giving them the opportunity to reflect back on their elementary and middle school years. These reflections are all from women who were able to overcome any adversity that they faced during adolescence. The women are all bright and successful. They are people young girls would look up to today. One would never believe that these women were the ones who were not invited to birthday parties, were called names, or that they struggled with body image issues.

Each reflection is handwritten by the women herself in order to create a personal relationship with the reader. The reflections are also coupled with how each woman was able to overcome the adversity she faced, as well as a short blurb describing the person she is today. Additionally, there are a few photos in the book. As a part of this project, I decided to go back to the specific locations where I experienced the psychological pain during elementary and middle school. All of the photos in the book were taken during this day, which is extremely powerful for me. These places will forever stay embedded in my mind. Although it was quite painful for me to do this, it felt great to return to them a confident person.



*Capturing Confidence:
Women's Reflections on
their preteen years*

meet marissa.
reflecting back on age 13

In middle school

I was always left

out:

not invited to slumber parties,
not included in the Halloween costume,
not talked to at the lunch table.



Two spreads from book

My intention is that this book will empower younger girls. During my adolescent years, it would have been so helpful to know that there was going to be an end to the way I felt. I am also hoping that the audience can be broader than just adolescents, and that the book can also be used by women my age and older to see that they were not the only ones with these struggles at the time. Perhaps the book can even be used by mothers of

elementary and middle school girls to see that their daughters will not feel this way forever. In the beginning of the book, I wrote a foreword that includes my personal experience and my reason for creating this book. I will be giving each group with which I have led a workshop a copy of my book.

In addition to my personal experience inspiring me to create this project, I was heavily influenced by other sources. The first of these influences was Frank Warren's PostSecret Project. Warren writes, "by participating in PostSecret, we are all invited into that collective level to become artists- free to explore and share private aspects of ourselves creatively, both through writing and the alternative language of visual art. Whether we are PostSecret creators or viewers, we are affected and changed by experiencing the creative process and interacting with the resulting works of art" (Warren 8). Similar to Warren's project of giving people the opportunity to create a postcard expressing a deep secret, these girls would be able to depict the emotions they tend to internalize through the photographs they take. Warren also maintains a blog that includes all of the postcards he receives, and allows people to comment to the blog. He hopes that someone's postcard will resonate with someone viewing it, so that they don't feel alone: this is what I would hope to happen through my website.

Also, I was inspired by the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, which is a campaign that focuses on building self-esteem in girls. This campaign includes many components such as a website with tools and activities to boost self-esteem, mentorship workshops (that are happening both online and around the world), workbooks, videos, and advertisements that include curvier women (2009). This program is multi-dimensional and has allowed me to see how something of this nature can become so successful and powerful.

Not only have I enjoyed creating this project and the process leading up to it, but I have also found it tremendously helpful. It has been so great for me to reflect back on this time and turn my dreadful elementary and middle school years into something positive. Looking at the comments on the website each day, or opening up the book and reading one of the reflections, makes me wish I was given tools such as these when I was in these girls' shoes. Recently, a seventeen-year-old girl from New Jersey emailed me after viewing my project on the Art & Design website. She wanted to let me know how much my book spoke to her and how she was able to relate to each story in the book. She told me that she is

inspired by me and that she purchased a copy of the book. Her email made my day. To know that I was able to make a difference in someone's life and help her in some small way is all I can ever ask for. In the future, I hope to reach out to even more girls and stress just how important it is to "capture confidence."



*Exhibit in Work:Ann
Arbor Gallery*

Works Cited

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