Raising Awareness About Girls’ Struggles

AUG. 4, 2014

Advertising

By JANE L. LEVERE

GIRLS INC. helps nearly 140,000 underprivileged girls across North America. But the leaders of the nonprofit group think they could do more — they just need to persuade more women to lend their support and money.

This week, Girls Inc. will start making its case through a public service advertising campaign in videos that highlight statistics on girls’ high school dropout rates, pregnancy and other issues.

Judy Vredenburgh, chief executive of Girls Inc., said the campaign, by the Chicago office of MARC USA, was meant to reach potential donors, make them aware of the challenges the girls it serves face and encourage them to “become champions for girls through both their financial support and advocacy for systemic change.”

The goal, Ms. Vredenburgh said, is to increase individual donations by at least 10 percent; the group also receives corporate support from companies like American Express, AT&T and Google and foundations like the Kellogg Foundation.

She said women — many of whom have faced these issues themselves — are the campaign’s primary focus, particularly corporate and community leaders. “We want to create a movement,” she said.

The new spots feature models portraying girls who are typically helped by Girls Inc. The group, which was founded in 1864 in Waterbury, Conn., and is now based in Manhattan, works with girls from 5 to 18 years old. Two-thirds of the

people it serves identify themselves as African-American, Hispanic or multiracial. Also, almost two-thirds live in families that earn $30,000 a year or less. Girls Inc. helps the girls set and achieve goals and resist peer pressure.

In one ad, a teenager in a waitress uniform takes out trash in an alley behind a restaurant. After she says, “I’m at risk of thinking there’s no point trying,” the spot states that one in four girls will not finish high school.

A preteen girl sitting at a bus shelter and looking at her reflection in it says, “I’m at risk of looking in the mirror and hating what I see.” The spot then states that 78 percent of girls under 17 are unhappy with their bodies. Also depicted is a girl who is approached by an adult male who puts his hand on her shoulder. She says, “I’m at risk of being told not to tell.” The spot says one in five girls will be a victim of childhood sexual abuse.

Then a young teenager, attending a party with older teenagers who pressure her to drink, says, “I’m at risk of regretting what I do, just to join the crowd.” The spot states that three in 10 girls will become pregnant before they are 20.

All statistics employed in the campaign refer to girls in the United States, Ms. Vredenburgh said, and “are numbers most Americans will be surprised by. Our job is to let the world know them.”

The girls next address the camera and state, “But with Girls Inc. in my corner, there for me every day, believing in me, showing me what’s possible, I can be strong enough to respect myself and my body, to finish school, to be a leader, to break the cycle. With you in my corner, I will not be another statistic. I will fight for myself, for my future. With you in my corner, I will win.”

All ads end with the message, “Fuel her fire and she will change the world.”

The new videos come in 30- and 60-second versions for broadcast, as well as in two-and-a-half and six-minute versions for use online, in social media and at events.

Tony Bucci, chairman of MARC USA and a board member of Girls Inc., said: “We didn’t start with the idea of a P.S.A. We started with the development of a brand strategy to support the organization’s growth. We used a new lens to clearly identify the organization’s point of difference, how we create change.”

Social services and advertising experts generally praised Girls Inc.’s campaign and strategy.
“The campaign gets at the root of some broad issues that intersect, are not stand-alone,” said Nancy Allen, who teaches in a health communications program jointly run by Emerson College and the Tufts University School of Medicine. “It’s taking a holistic approach.”

Deborah Small, an associate professor of marketing and psychology at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, said Girls Inc.’s mission “is something that resonates right now in our culture.” Professor Small added, “There’s a lot of discussion of girls’ empowerment and youth in general that will be very resonant with people. We are generally more sympathetic to children’s needs and causes than adult’s needs and causes.”

But S. Bryn Austin, an associate professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, said the campaign, and Girls Inc., were pushing against a strong tide. “The environment around the girls,” she said, “such as their neighborhood and the larger society as a whole, is creating many problems for girls.” Even advertisers for fashion, diet pills, cosmetic surgery and tanning, she said, are selling products and services that ultimately can be damaging to girls.

Girls Inc. and other social service organizations “need a lot more help from the rest of us and from policy makers to change the conditions in which these girls are growing up,” she said.

A version of this article appears in print on August 5, 2014, on page B4 of the New York edition with the headline: Raising Awareness About Girls’ Struggles.