



New Beginnings campers gather in a tree house. Photos courtesy of High Rocks Educational Corporation.

Art Helps High Rocks Girls Reach New Heights

By P.J. Dickerscheid

High Rocks Educational Corporation in Hillsboro uses the creative inspiration of the arts to challenge young West Virginia women to reach high academic, professional and life goals.

"The arts are a fundamental part of our process," Executive Director Sarah Riley said. "Art is a tool just like writing is a tool or speech is a tool. We use those tools to help the girls understand the world around us."

High Rocks is an award-winning leadership organization that provides transformative education and service learning to hundreds of young women a year. Riley's mother, Susan Burt, a former school librarian

and gifted/talented coordinator, started the program in 1996 after noticing that girls tended to lose their enthusiasm and positive outlooks in middle school. She wanted to help them build their self-confidence and become better prepared for bright futures.

Through the arts, High Rocks girls "learn more about themselves and the world around them; they learn new artistic skills, form a new respect for craftsmanship, build their personal identity, and discover innovative tools to express themselves. We are educating, empowering, and inspiring their creative voice," Riley wrote in a recent application for funding from the West Virginia Division of Culture and History and the Commission on the Arts.

In the past five years, High Rocks Educational Corporation has received \$40,453 in grants funded by the West Virginia Legislature and the National Endowment for the Arts. Most of that money came from the division's Arts in Education grant program, and was used to help pay artists to teach girls storytelling/media production, printmaking, various forms of creative expression. The grant also helped to produce a math musical theater, an artist-in-residence program and a series of after-school workshops that focus on songwriting and Appalachian music.

Eighth-grade girls participating in the New Beginnings camp in June build their confidence and communication skills by sharing their thoughts, talking about

relationships, and spending time in private reflection. They also engage in innovative programs that explore math, science, writing, horseback riding and games.

In July, graduates of previous New Beginnings camps – ninth through twelfth graders – return to High Rocks to follow specialty tracks, like “Math and Art: The Golden Mean,” which focuses on math, aesthetics, art, and theories of the universe.

One of High Rocks’ unique programs, math musical theater, touches on the connections between

mathematics and music theory by teaching the mathematical nature of rhythms, patterns, scales, and harmonies. The girls then apply these ideas when composing songs about mathematical rules and concepts, and add drama and voice when presenting and recording their original works.

During nightly campfires, the girls decorate journals, respond to creative-writing and visual-art prompts, create mixed media projects, collaborate on writing songs and poems, and perform songs,

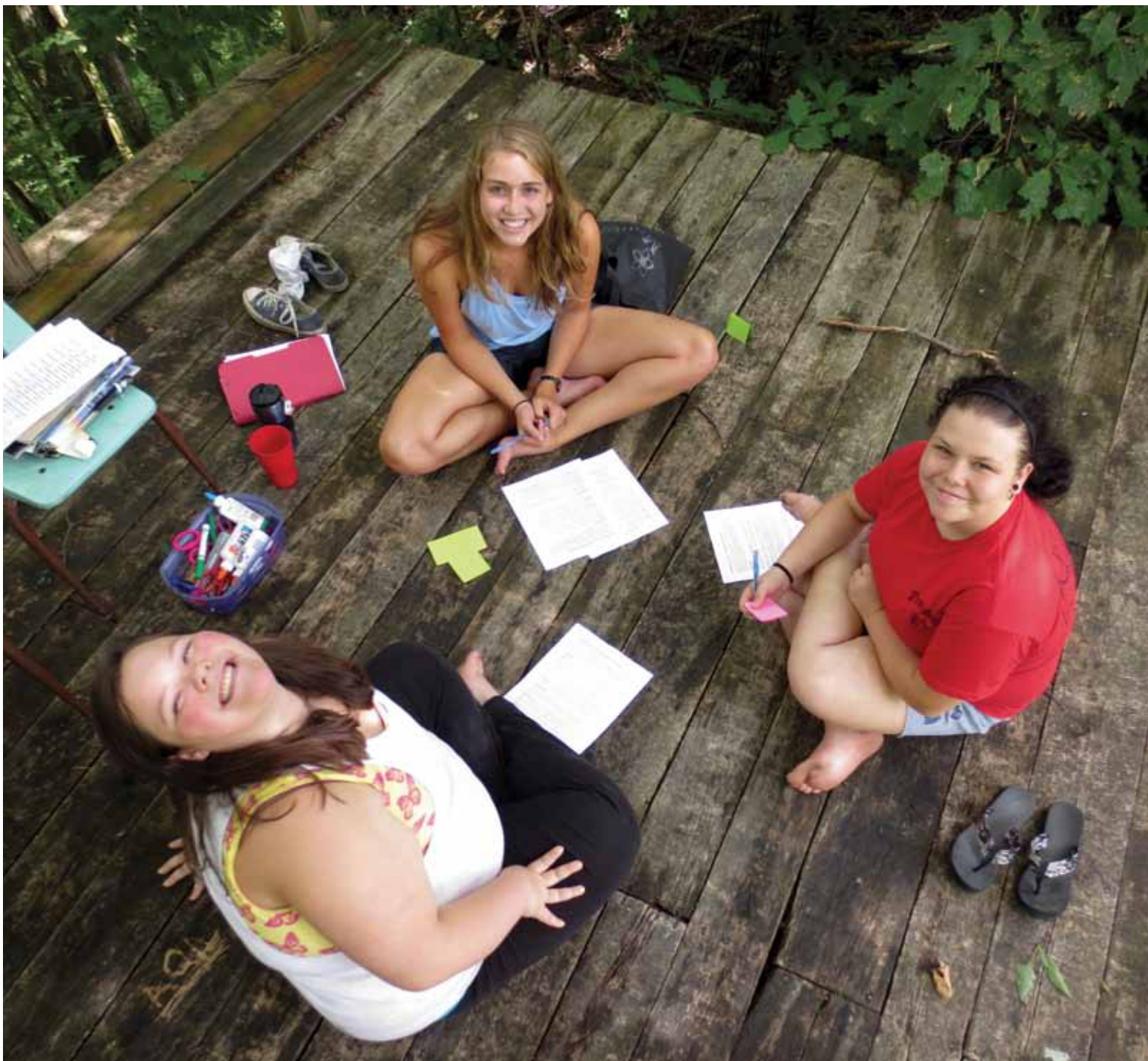
music, poetry, original plays and skits.

Campers also try their hand at painting, sculpting clay and other art mediums. Each girl also spends a night alone in the woods with a sleeping bag, three matches, a bottle of water, and a small bag of food.

During the school year, the girls receive individualized after-school tutoring and are involved in community service projects. High Rocks girls also receive counseling for setting life goals that may include college and careers.

The friendships the girls develop – and the knowledge, confidence and

High Rocks girls work on a project together during Camp Steele.



inspiration they receive – stay with them long after they leave camp.

“I found someplace I can be me,” one camper wrote in her evaluation. “I have more self-confidence and can do way more amazing things than before I came to camp. I’m a better and stronger person.”

Riley said a key to the program’s success is recruiting and developing relationships with “artists who love teaching as much as they love their art form.” Artists who are motivated by making a difference in young people’s lives can work wonders in helping girls find and use their own voices to express themselves.

Making appropriate changes based on feedback from the girls about which teaching artists, programs and activities they were most drawn to is critical to ensuring the program’s success, she said.

“If they are not enjoying it and learning from it, try something else.”



Above: A High Rocks AmeriCorps volunteer helps Camp Steele girls work in the garden.

Below: Jade, a High Rocks participant, talks about a project she made for the creative expressions class.

