

Girl Power

Step Up Women's Network gives young women the confidence and skills to pursue their career goals. *Modern Family's* **Julie Bowen** lends a hand

Every year, the Los Angeles-based Step Up Women's Network provides mentoring opportunities to more than 500 high school girls from underserved communities in Chicago, L.A., and New York. Starting in ninth grade, each teen is asked to dedicate an average of 100 hours a year for four years to after-school and weekend programs that include confidence-building exercises, college tours, and one-on-one time with working women—professionals whose expertise ranges from the Internet to entertainment. One such mentor? Actress Julie Bowen.



Actress Julie Bowen and some of the Step Up teens create "confidence business cards" at a school in Los Angeles.



How You Can Help!



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Why is empowering young women important to you?

I come from a family of three daughters and went to some great all-girls schools, so I was introduced early to the idea that girls can do every single thing boys can. But I realize not everybody gets that type of support. Step Up lets girls see themselves not just as an addendum to boys. And for the last two years, 100 percent of the program's participants graduated from high school.

What types of things do you do with Step Up? Recently I visited some of the girls after school, and we made "confidence business cards." We all walked around the room and wrote down things about each other: "You're

creative," "You're friendly," "You're the best student"—thoughtful observations, not just "You're pretty." And then we each picked one comment that meant the most to us, and it became the tagline for our personal business card. I was wildly impressed with this culture of female support. Not one girl said something catty.

What kind of advice do you give the girls? One asked, "What would you tell

somebody who wants to be an actor?" I said, "Stay in school." When I first came out here as a 20-something, I had things to talk about besides theater and acting. Knowing I had other choices gave me the courage to act.

What have you taken away from your interactions with the girls?

These are teens who are confident in themselves and confident of their interests: One girl was really into entomology—the study of bugs. Another was into zombies. When I was their age, I wouldn't necessarily have had the courage to be that unique. I was still trying to conform. But these girls are fantastically individual—they're not interested in playing to female stereotypes. They couldn't care less about any of that! —SANDY M. FERNÁNDEZ