

THE SPARK

Lisa Hinkelman gave up her tenure-track teaching gig at Ohio State to start a program that empowers girls. Now, ROX is sweeping the state, helping thousands of young women boost self-esteem, fight bullying and find their paths

Story by HOLLY ZACHARIAH • Photos by WILL SHILLING

"It really is sort of simple: More-confident girls make better choices," says Lisa Hinkelman, shown here in her office

"Never
never
never
give up"
-Winston
Churchill



As a college student working the graveyard shift at a rape crisis center in Pittsburgh, Lisa Hinkelman expected that every ring of the phone would bring another call from yet another woman whose night had gone terribly, tragically wrong.

But it turned out that wasn't the case at all. Call after call after call, the stories were remarkably the same.

Hi. The nightmare came again. This time, it started with him ...

I can't sleep. I keep remembering the night that ...

It was so long ago, but it seems like yesterday that he ...

Lisa was stunned.

At the time, she was studying at Chatham College in Pittsburgh, intent on graduating with her degree in psychology and education and heading into the world to do great things as a counselor of women.

All of those calls, all of those stories, all of those nights listening to the tales of wounded women who had never been helped and never been healed, helped to reset her course.

She enrolled in graduate school at the Ohio State University and eventually switched her focus to young girls. "How do we stop these girls from becoming the women who make those calls in the middle of the night?" she wondered. "How do we stop them from growing up and finding themselves alone, broken, misunderstood?"

To say she was driven is tantamount to calling the Mighty Mississippi a creek. Lisa graduated Chatham in 1999 and by 2005, she had her doctorate from OSU and had accepted a faculty position at the university.

All the while, she studied. With a \$10,000 research grant, she assembled a team of interns, and she searched. She

explored: What makes girls so un-self-aware, so lacking confidence, so unsure?

Over time, the answers she uncovered built the foundation for Ruling Our eXperiences (ROX), Lisa's nonprofit organization that now empowers girls to live healthy, independent, successful, violence-free lives.

It is expertise she came by in the trenches.

"In one of my early years on faculty at Ohio State, I once was asked at a meeting if I was there to take notes," she says today



Hinkelman wears her heart on her wrists

with a laugh—a bold, loud, I-love-life laugh, the kind that makes everyone else in a room wish they were in on the joke. "You get confidence because you build competence. So I built competence."

But she was far from done: She was only just beginning.

In 2006, Lisa debuted the curriculum she developed to teach young girls how

to believe in themselves, how to defend themselves, how to value themselves. She wanted to teach girls to not judge themselves by their beauty and their body but instead to pour their energies into their minds, their goals and achievements and their passion for good.

Her research was endless. Each girl—from elementary to high school—was interviewed before and after the teachings. Parents were questioned; school counselors weighed in.

And Lisa tracked every bit of it—what worked, what didn't. The program grew. By 2010 she had copyrighted the curriculum. Then, in 2011, taking a dose of her own empowerment medicine, she left.

On track for tenure and a rising star at OSU, she quit her job.

With the support of her husband, her closest friends and former colleagues, she created a nonprofit organization, and ROX was officially born.

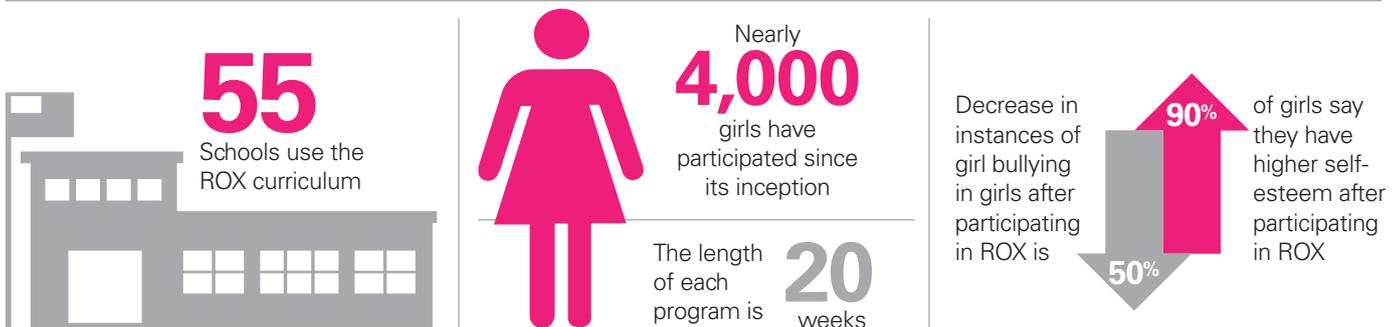
Today, it is used in 55 schools and has served nearly 4,000 girls.

"It really was organic. After that time working those phones at the rape crisis center, and seeing the damage that had been done, I needed to find a way to close the circle," she said. "When you boil it all down, it really is sort of simple: More-confident girls make better choices. We'd like to change the world and change society's portrayal of and treatment of women and all that is unfair about that. But while we're working on that, let's find a way to give these girls now the tools they need to thrive."

Congruent. That's what Lisa's confidante and close friend, Maureen Casamassimo, says she is.

"What she presents is what she lives," said Casamassimo, the internship coordinator for school counseling students at Ohio State

ROX BY THE NUMBERS



Hinkelman surrounded by ROX girls



MOXE101

Dr. Lisa Hinkelman was at a girl-empowerment conference when a session title jumped out at her: Applying Light Make-up Tips.

You will not find that taught in a ROX class.

ROX (Ruling Our eXperiences) is the nonprofit organization that Lisa started for girls in elementary, middle and high school.

Nearly 4,000 girls have completed the 20-week curriculum, which is taught by ROX-trained and licensed female counselors at schools. Generally, 10 or 12 girls are in the sessions together, and they meet about 90 minutes a week.

ROX seeks grants and donations to cover the cost of program materials (it takes an average of \$75 for every girl who goes through the course), and some schools use their own pots of grants or special-programming money to pay for it.

The program is evidence-based, meaning the classes are structured and taught the way they are based on years of data about what works. It's data that Hinkelman collected while a graduate and doctoral student and, later, as a professor at the Ohio State University.

The girls learn about healthy relationships, dating violence, boundary-setting and sexual harassment.

They discuss body image, self-esteem and girl-bullying. They explore the roles of women in leadership and

meet role models. They study healthy communication and teamwork. They set academic and career goals and define how to achieve them.

They also are taught physical self-defense.

The research shows that girls who go through the program challenge themselves more: They take more difficult classes and like school better; their instances of bullying decrease; and they forge better, more healthy relationships.

Rachel Zufall was a student of Lisa's at Ohio State and was part of the team that developed the ROX lessons. She now teaches it to girls at Columbus Preparatory Academy.

She said one of the most powerful things about the program is that it creates a safe place for the girls to learn about themselves.

In six years, she said, she's never had a ROX class where someone, at some point, didn't come forward to say they or someone they know had been assaulted in some way at some time.

"We're not there to braid our hair and make a poster," Zufall said. "In this program, we talk about real issues, and we address them. For the girls, it's not about changing who you are. It's about figuring out who you want to be and recognizing that you have value, that you are important, and that you matter."

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University and a mentor to Lisa when she was working on her PhD. “Even in a group or a class, she never makes anyone she’s talking to feel as if they are less than the only person present. You are of value to her.”

Lisa’s husband of 14 years, Bob Heine, said his wife’s “sheer brilliance” is just one of many reasons he fell in love with her. Well, that and the fact that she was a heck of a defenseman on the Chatham ice-hockey team.

Now a hockey coach at St. Francis DeSales High School, Bob coached a travel team in Pittsburgh back in the late 1990s. His team used the gym right after Lisa’s, so they’d pass each other on the ice—literally.

“We talked off and on, probably about the Steelers and Penguins,” he said. “Eventually, I mumbled something like ‘Hey, we should go out tonight,’ and she said yes. Within a year we were engaged. I am so fortunate today,

because I am married to my best friend.”

With their rescued mutt puppy, Cooper, the two live sort of manic lives at their Blacklick home. In addition to ROX, Lisa runs a private counseling office, and Bob is armament chief at the Defense Supply Center Columbus in Whitehall. Lisa also remains an adjunct professor at OSU, though a diagnosis late last year of thyroid cancer sidelined her from that for a while.

The cancer—she is doing great after successful surgery—came just as she was celebrating yet another success: her first book, *Girls Without Limits*. Admittedly, she says, spotting it on the shelves at the Barnes & Noble at Easton is one of the few moments she’s ever publicly lost her cool.

Still, with all of her credentials, Lisa seems a bit shell-shocked about her obvious successes.

ROX, after all, has captured the attention

of some of Columbus’ most well-connected and powerful businesswomen: Cindy Monroe, founder and CEO of Thirty-One Gifts; Tammy Roberts Myers, a vice president at Limited Brands; the female attorneys at the prestigious Downtown law firm, Bricker & Eckler. They all are fans.

“Lisa has a meet-people-where-they-are philosophy,” said Dawn Tyler Lee, a senior vice president with United Way of Central Ohio and a member of the ROX board of directors. “She never tries to turn people into who she wants them to be, but recognizes their strengths and their potential and helps them figure out how to get there on their own.”

Running ROX on a cobbled-together budget of grants and donations, Lee said, is most impressive.

Lisa cuts coupons and cashes in reward points to get office supplies; she looks for

GIRLS WHO ROX



GUADALUPE MEDINA, 21

BIO: Ohio State senior studying public affairs and communications

ROX ALUMNI FROM: Columbus Metro High School, junior year

GOALS: Join Teach for America after graduation to teach low-income and minority students in an urban school while earning her master’s degree, then eventually write education policy

WHAT ROX DID FOR HER: “I come from a Latino family, and moving out of my home to go to college—even if it was 20 minutes away—was not ordinary,” she says. “That’s something hard to do in our culture. But ROX gave me the courage to do it, and my family supported my decision. The program has given me confidence in knowing I can do what I set my mind to.”



VICTORIA GREEN, 14

BIO: Columbus Alternative High School freshman

ROX ALUMNI FROM: Columbus City Preparatory School for Girls, sixth grade

GOALS: Become a civil engineer in the United States Navy

WHAT ROX DID FOR HER: With Lisa Hinkelman’s encouragement, she applied for and received a scholarship to attend Girlz Rhythm N Rock Camp this past summer. Now, she plays bass guitar in band called The Universe in Our Eyes. “It made me so much more confident,” she says. “I put higher expectations on myself. I took harder classes—a math class two grades above my level. The list of things I got involved with grew—five clubs, karate classes, playing the guitar. The difference it made was huge.”



DACIA WHITESIDE, 16

BIO: Beechcroft High School junior

ROX ALUMNI FROM: Beechcroft High School, sophomore year

GOALS: Attend Alabama State University and major in music with an eye on becoming a college band instructor

WHAT ROX DID FOR HER: “My ROX counselor was able to take us to so many places to see so many powerful women in Columbus who were all doing really great things. And I felt like, ‘Wow I could really be anything;’ ” she says. “I could be an entrepreneur. A doctor. Anything I want to be. These women were really making a difference in the world. I could be one of these women.”

Photos courtesy / ROX

giveaways that the facilitators can use in classrooms; she and her employee (yes, that's singular— she has a devoted paid staff of one, Lauren Hancock) bought “do-it-yourself” furniture and did it themselves to equip the ROX offices on Dublin Road.

“She is,” Myers said, “a woman who makes things happen.”

But the transformation of office space into a hub of creativity is one thing; transformation of shy girls to strong and confident women is another.

And it is the latter that Lisa knows so well.

As a kid, she says, she just never quite fit the mold of what society seemed to expect of her.

She was always tall for a girl—she is 5 foot 9 inches now, and that's without wearing any of her admittedly beloved obsession, stiletto shoes—and she excelled at sports from a young age. She was a softball pitcher, a basketball forward, a hockey star.

She had two brothers, and her mom wanted a girly girl. She bought Lisa a pink canopied bed. She enrolled her in ballet and gymnastics. She taught her to sew and to cook.

Lisa never resented any of it. She loved her mom for it. But she knew early on that she was going to have to figure out her own path.

Her grandmother played a big role in that. She was a woman who, in a time when it was almost unheard of, mowed her own grass, shoveled her own snow, painted her own house. She waitressed at a local diner in downtown Pittsburgh.

“She showed me that it's OK to be whoever you are,” Lisa said. “I had the best of both sides. I was reinforced for being strong and reinforced for being feminine. I learned from a very early age that being both is OK.”

And she carries that through into ROX. She helps the girls to understand themselves, to define themselves, to find their own strength. She teaches them to defend themselves—physically, against an attacker, but also against bullying and bigotry and forced roles and unfair expectations and society's pigeon-holed notions of what a woman should do and be.

“The girls learn to stand up for themselves in every way,” Lisa said. “That's so important, because you aren't going to defend yourself unless you believe you are worth defending.”

Perhaps, then, instead of making middle-of-the-night phone calls, this generation of girls will become the confident, world-changing women they were destined to be.

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