

Looking Forward While Giving Back

VILLANOVA SCHOOL OF BUSINESS ALUMNA FINDS SUCCESS IN WORK AND SERVICE

IT BEGAN SIMPLY. JUST A FEW

young women in New York City, like-minded business professionals, who were wanting to make a difference in the world.

In 2005 they gathered, in 2007 they launched WGIRLS Inc., and by the end of 2010 they will have expanded to their ninth city in the United States and to their first overseas.

WGIRLS, headquartered in Manhattan, is a group of more than 300 professional women who donate their time, energy, and talents to assist disadvantaged women and children. In cities as far-flung as San Francisco, Milwaukee, and Pittsburgh, the WGIRLS' chapters host fundraising events, offer customized programming in local communities, and work alongside other organizations with similar values and goals.

For Amy Heller, the founder and president, none of this was even conceivable when she graduated from the Villanova School of Business in 1998.

"I always knew that I would go into business. I have a passion for creating things, and for shaping their direction," Heller says. "But it never occurred to me that I would found a non-profit organization. I just assumed I would leverage my education in a for-profit business."

For a while, Heller did head in that direction. After leaving VSB with a degree in marketing, she worked for corporations such as Arthur Andersen, J.P. Morgan, UBS, and Citigroup, making a good living in financial services. She still resides in that world (serving as a consultant for Morgan Stanley), but says her heart is at home with her NPO. "Financial services feeds my bank account," she says, "but WGIRLS feeds my soul."

Among other successful projects, WGIRLS prepares meals for guests of the American Cancer Society's Hope Lodge; fulfills the holiday wishes of children in



Amy Heller VSB '98 is the founder of WGIRLS, Inc.

need; collects and distributes thousands of prom dresses to economically disadvantaged high school girls; and provides support for a lengthy list of charitable associations that includes Harlem Hospital, Save the Children, and The Arts Effect. In New York City alone, WGIRLS has raised and donated over \$400,000 and contributed countless hours of volunteer service.

WGIRLS is launching at least two new chapters before the end of this year, in Los Angeles and New Jersey, along with the establishment of its first international branch in London. The expansion is part of an ambitious plan to establish chapters in all 50 U.S. states as quickly as the group's infrastructure will allow.

Heller says the foundation for her success—in business and in charity—was cemented at VSB. "I use knowledge from all of my finance and marketing classes daily," she says. "Villanova consistently encouraged the idea of

giving to others. I developed a lot of my leadership experience during my college years—volunteering with my sorority and serving as president of the marketing society—these were all stepping stones to prepare me for what I do today."

Now Heller considers her leadership role with WGIRLS to be among the most important of her life. "I really do believe that the key to happiness is looking outside of yourself and giving to others, and that if you have any ability to do that in any capacity then it's your obligation to do it."

Coming to that philosophy has been a long distance traveled in a short 12 years since leaving VSB. "When asked if I envisioned my life to be as it is today, the overwhelming answer is 'yes' in the broader sense—I'm happy, doing something I love, feeling accomplished," she says. "But it is for completely different reasons than what I ever would have thought of back then." — *Chris Nicholson*