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Five questions for a Smart Girl

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(Photo: BOB BIELK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

LONG BEACH TOWNSHIP – When she was a senior at Monsignor Donovan in Toms River, Emily Raleigh wrote a book to her younger sister, Sophie, offering advice on how smart girls could navigate the mine field of high school.

She spelled out which teachers to take and which to avoid. She discussed how to manage time. And she began to think more about it, asking, what makes a smart girl? And why, in the digital age, is it so hard to find information that speaks to her?

Raleigh, now 20, and a student at Fordham University in New York, is the founder of the Smart Girls Group, a company featuring an online magazine, blogs, classes, a book club and, next month, its first summit — all designed to empower and unite what Raleigh calls the next generation of superstar women.

As someone who grew up sailing near her Brant Beach home, she is making a splash. Raleigh started the business with \$9. Now her company has 800 members, ages 13 to 25, from 35 countries. And she recently won the New York Young Entrepreneur Challenge, beating out more than 40 others for \$10,000 and access to legal and marketing expertise.

“They took a hobby and basically turned it into a business, turned it into a branding empire,” said Joseph Scaretta, chief development officer of FrontStreet Facilities Solution Inc., a New York-based facility management company that sponsors the program. “One of the things I like about it is, in their eyes, everybody who’s a part of Smart Girls is smart.”

Raleigh sat down with the Asbury Park Press and discussed her business, what it means to be smart, and why women in her generation are ready to step into leadership positions.

How did the book for your sister become a business?

I gave (the book to Sophie) for Christmas, and from there it turned into this whole other project. It became my New Year’s resolution to take the book and the whole idea of the smart girl and turn it into something that would have a larger impact.

Who can join?

Our whole philosophy is that every girl is a smart girl. We don’t want it to be something where it excludes girls because that’s not how you empower people. What we do is we say we will provide every girl an opportunity to be part of the Smart Girls Group as long as she shares her smarts back with the community. So every girl ... is contributing in some way, whether that’s through writing articles or taking on a leadership role or leading a campus chapter. The opportunities are endless.

Are you surprised by how it is playing out?

Yes. I was planning on going to college to study chemistry and become an orthodontist. That was my goal, so this was not in the plan. Ironically, when I applied to Fordham, I accidentally clicked the wrong button, I think.

What does the business’s growth tell you about what the market is not providing?

The thing is, girls don’t want to be sold on something. I think there’s a place in the world for celebrity content and there’s a place for, you know, nine ways to have a good Friday night. But I think that girls are looking for more than that, and I think Smart Girls Group provides that. It’s content and products and services for the whole person.

Even now, we see stories about female executives running into barriers. Does that scare you?

I don’t think it does. We’re definitely a changing culture when it comes to that. Our culture talks about how girls need to have more confidence, and if they have more confidence they’ll get to C-level (executive) jobs. But just saying people should have more confidence is very, very difficult because, where do you find that? The belief in Smart Girls Group is that if you believe you’re smart and you can see your smarts and use those smarts, that’s how you reach those positions, because then you see your self-worth and you have a different sense of respect for yourself. And that turns into confidence.

And there's definitely a challenge right now, kind of an inequality in leadership in corporations and government, but I think our generation really could change that. I see the girls in Smart Girls Group, and when we ask them what they want to be when they grow up, they're not saying, "I want to be in government." They're saying, "I want to be president." They're not saying, "I want to be in business." They want to be CEO.

SMART GIRLS CONFERENCE

What: A summit featuring speakers, panels, workshops and networking for women ages 13 to 25

When: July 9-10

Where: Fordham University Lincoln Center, 113 W. 60th St., New York City

Cost: \$79.99

For more information: www.smartgirlsconference.com

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