



PHOTOS BY KELLIE D. BOTTRELL/DN  
**Left: Loan Nguyen, 16, follows Kellie Magnuson's instructions on proper stretching techniques. Magnuson has been involved with dance for 16 years and was an instructor at Hollyday Dance Studio for the last four years.**

**Below: Paula Squires, 12, of Lincoln was all smiles for lunch while Tagi Adams looks on.**

## UNL students found group to provide support for girls

By JENNIFER WALKER  
*Summer Co-editor*

More than 40 percent of young women in the United States become pregnant before age 20.

In Lancaster county, 240 teens gave birth in 1995, accounting for 7.5 percent of all births in the county.

Seventy percent of teen-age mothers drop out of school, according to the Lincoln Lancaster County Health department.

That's where Project Girl comes in. According to Tagi Adams, the first-year program's co-coordinator, there aren't many resources in Lincoln for girls who may be at risk for teen pregnancy, violence and drug abuse.

"We think young women are being neglected," she said. "And the numbers of young women involved in violent criminal behavior and teen pregnancy are going up."

The program was started in January by four University of Nebraska-Lincoln students, Adams, KT Ross, LeAnn Pancharoen and Nigh Tigh; Susan Jensen, a UNL graduate; and one Lincoln Action Program staff member, Florine Joseph.

Project Girl is a 21-week program that serves girls in grades six through eight by teaching them everything from job skills to pregnancy prevention, Adams said.

"We wanted to create a space for girls only," she said. "Women need to learn to trust each other and look to other women for role models"

Diversity is also a big part of Project Girl. So in the first six weeks of the program, the girls learn about their cultural backgrounds and those of the Project Girl staff.

Pancharoen said learning cultural background first was important.

"We thought about the information we were lacking when we were growing up," she said.

Sixteen girls, ages 11-16, met with the Project Girl staff, who each presented a topic they researched. Ross, a junior women's studies major, presented "Latina y Chicana Mujeres," for which she won the Karen Dunning award, and \$500.

After the first "multicultural classroom" phase, the project moved on to teen pregnancy and violence prevention. In that 12-week session, the girls learned about teen parenting, body image, dating violence and self defense. A different speaker presented each week. Speakers from the Rape/Spouse Abuse Crisis Center, 2545 N St., South East Community College, 8800 O St., Planned Parenthood, 2246 O St., and the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department, 3140 N St., were among those the Project Girl staff enlisted to present.

The final phase of Project Girl is a three-week summer camp, with more presenters and job-site tours. The camp started Monday; its purpose is to provide examples of women in professional fields whom the girls can look up to.

Tania Diaz, an attorney with Nebraska Advocacy Services, which advocates for people with mental and developmental disabilities, gave a presentation Tuesday.

She said she spoke about the process of becoming an attorney, and how important it was to stay in school.

"We encouraged them to be very focused and determined," she said. "And if they are interested in the law, it's a good way to change the system."

She said she thought Project Girl was crucial.

"Young girls need to know that there are people out there who have gone to school, are professionals and enjoy their professions."

The example the Project Girl staff sets has had an impact on the girls in the group, said Florine Joseph, Lincoln Action Program staff member and co-coordinator of Project Girl.

"(Project Girl) provides something different from drugs and the main man in their lives," Joseph said.

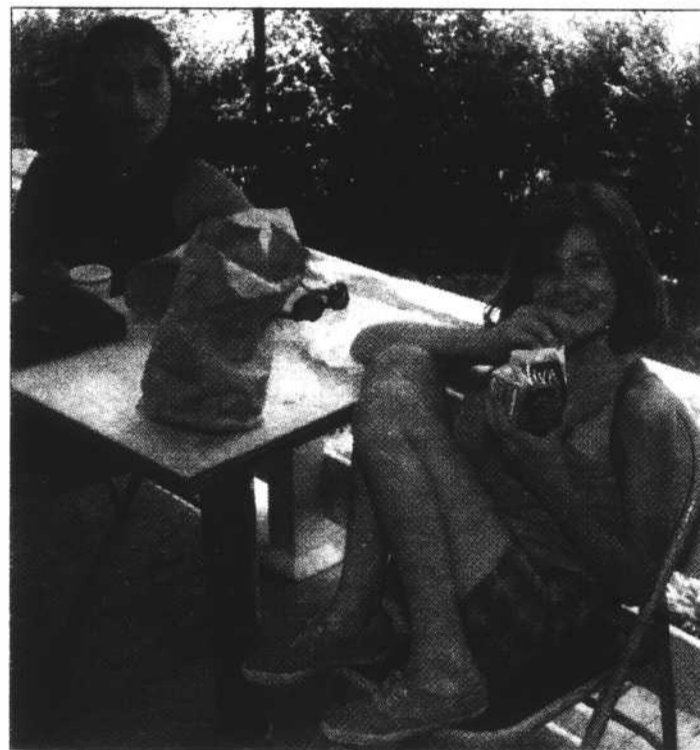
Adams said the chance to do something different than their peers was important to the girls.

"The girls can see that 'here are women who care about us,'" she said.

One of the girls missed her ride to a Project Girl meeting, so she ran there, Adams said.

Shannon Johnson, a Project Girl member, gave her own description of the program.

"It's about feminism, sisterhood, solidarity and realizing that boys are just a side thing."



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 Project Girl co-coordinator