

# Education

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## becoming... me

Portland-based non-profit BecomeX gives teen girls the skills they need to succeed in work, play and life

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Staff Reporter

It's not often that Lake Oswego High School seniors Emily Lewis and Kaylee Crooke get to leave their hometown — the “bubble,” as they call it — to meet girls from other races and backgrounds.

So when the non-profit organization BecomeX provided them with that opportunity at a camp last summer, Lewis and Crooke were delighted to learn about their fellow campers' life experiences — and do their part to shatter the stereotype that Lake Oswego teens are snobby, rich kids.

“We wanted them to realize that we're not perfect just because we live in Lake Oswego,” Lewis said. “We have the same problems here.”

Some of the girls in the group dealt with abusive childhoods, pressure to drink or do drugs and skewed body image. Others came from immigrant families or were struggling to make ends meet. A few had self-esteem problems. But they all found common ground as teen girls dealing with being teen girls.

“We were all different, but we found we could connect through something we were all dealing with,” Lewis explained. “We could all relate.”

The idea for BecomeX — an organization that provides career and life skills development for young women ages 16 to 29 — came from founder Michele O'Hara in response to the death of her 19-year-old niece, who committed suicide.

BecomeX teaches them to lead lives directed by choice — not circumstance. During the program, participants study topics like self-discovery, wellness and fitness, self-defense, skin care and makeup, career and college development skills, financial management, personal style and self-expression. The girls also keep diaries and talk openly about issues they're facing in their lives and what they hope to achieve in the future.

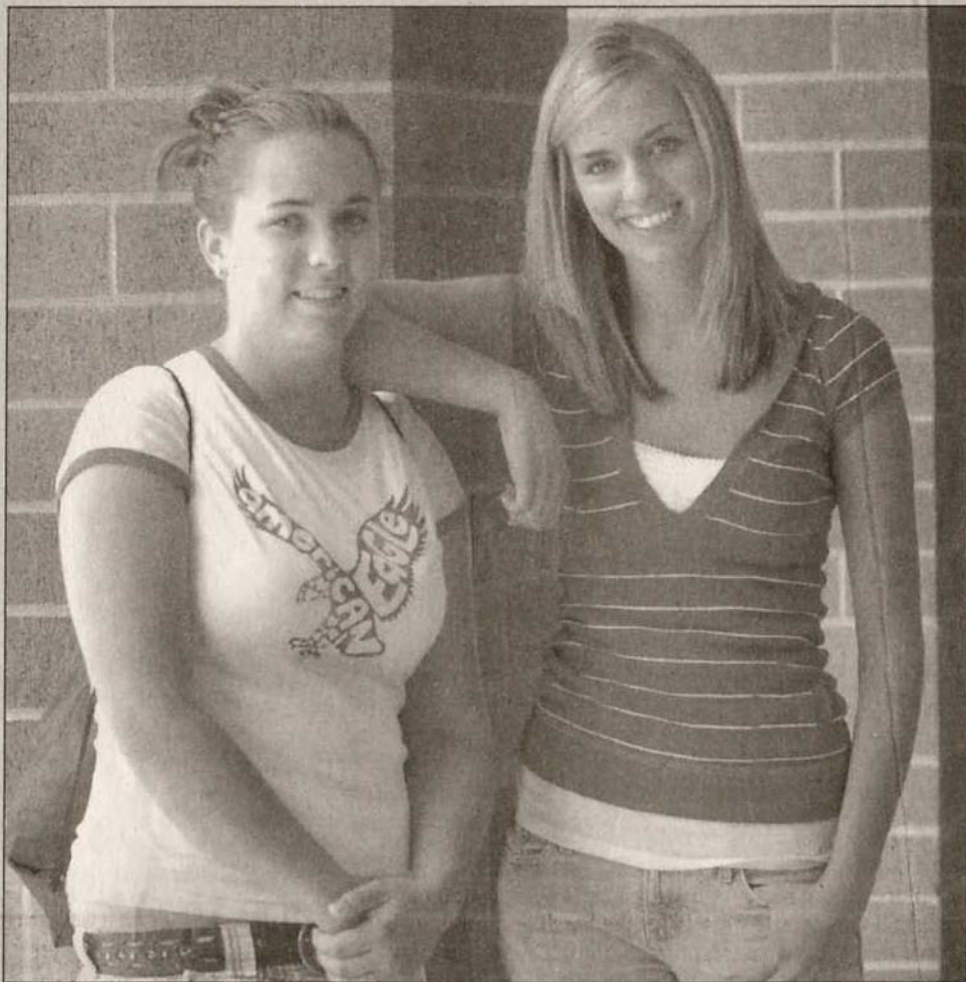
“We don't target at-risk youth, because every kid is at risk of not realizing their full potential,” explained Anca Solberg, BecomeX community relations director. “It's also important for girls in high school to get out of their comfort zone and what they're used to.”

According to Solberg, once the girls meet and begin to converse, they learn to just be themselves.

“They feel like it's a safe place,” Solberg added. “It's not their own high school and they don't need to look or act a certain way. They can leave the labels behind. I love what happens in the classes.”

Crooke, who was encouraged to join BecomeX by her mother, was hesitant at first but warmed up to the program after its first day. From area professionals, she learned a variety of life skills, such as managing her money, showing personal style according to her body type and preparing healthy food.

At the end of her time at BecomeX, Crooke gave an “I AM” manifesto that detailed what she learned through her experience with her fellow campers. She spoke about how she came to the realization that her father, who is divorced from her mother, would not always be there for her — and that she would be OK,



ABOVE: STAFF PHOTO / VERN UYETAKE BOTTOM: SUBMITTED PHOTO

Above: Lake Oswego High School seniors Emily Lewis and Kaylee Crooke attended the BecomeX program last summer, where the two friends met other girls from across the Portland area. Below: Their group included, from left, Crooke; Ana Maria Stroe, of Garden Grove, Calif.; Laura Pinto of La Salle High School; Lewis; Katie Eison Washington of Catlin Gabel High School; Maritza Grande of Forest Grove High School; Lucia Martinez of Sunset High School; Noreen Edlen of Jesuit High School; and Cassandra Honeywell of Tualatin High School.



despite it.

“The girls all cared so much, that by the end, you knew them so personally. It just felt different knowing that people out there have the same problems and that they will listen and care,” Crooke said. “When you let it all out you feel so good ... so cleansed,” Lewis added.

BecomeX holds classes each quarter. During the fall, winter and spring, the pro-

gram is 12 weeks and meets each Tuesday night. During the summer, BecomeX holds one-week condensed versions of its program.

This year's camp dates are: June 24-29 at Tualatin High School and July 9-14 at the BecomeX headquarters, 322 NW 6th Avenue, Suite 200 in Portland. Registration fee is \$100; scholarships are available for the remaining \$850 in fees. For info: [www.becomex.org](http://www.becomex.org).