

## ***Power Camp: Liberating Ideas, Liberated Visions***

### ***New paradigm for women***

In the mid-1990s, Tatiana Fraser was enrolled in Women's Studies at the University of Ottawa. Her view of the world was so altered by her expanded understanding of women's social and political roles in contemporary society that she decided to find a way to share this information with women younger than herself. Says Tatiana: "I remember thinking that this information, which was so liberating to me, would have been even more useful had I had it earlier. That realization was the beginning of Power Camp."

Tatiana, along with fellow classmates Willow Scobie and Stephanie Austin, researched high school curricula and discovered that issues specific to the lived realities of adolescent and pre-adolescent girls were not covered in school. The three agreed that media awareness, critical thinking tools, increased awareness of issues related to violence against women, sexual health and body image all were areas that needed to be explored in order for young girls to navigate adolescence successfully.

They decided to develop a summer camp experience for girls between the ages of 11 and 15. Their goal was to offer a package of activities – outdoor education, creative expression and body awareness workshops, critical thinking skill development, and social-political education – that would encourage participants to question the roles expected of them by society, and to develop their own perceptions of who they are and what is important to them.



*Power Camp logos project strength and confidence.*

Power Camp was founded during the summer of 1995. The fun part of the exercise was developing the program and brainstorming activities; the real work was finding financial partners, doing community outreach work, creating partnerships, securing an operating space, working out insurance coverage and promoting the program.

### *Testing the idea*

After completing their Bachelor of Arts degrees in 1996, Tatiana, Stephanie and Willow ran the first series of Power Camps. Eight girls attended each of the four inaugural sessions. The University of Ottawa donated operating space and the Trillium Foundation provided operational funding. All three women felt that the camps were a success.

“With each session, fresh ideas were generated, policies and procedures developed as the needs arose, and our core operating principle – that each girl see her place in the selection and structuring of camp activities – was proved workable,” says Tatiana.

After that second summer, organizers spent time networking with women’s and youth organizations and offering mini-camp experiences and discussion groups to high school students and community organizations. The Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre agreed to sponsor the program and provided Power Camp with operating space. Teenaged girls began creating their own Power Camp spaces in their high schools, and word-of-mouth advertising kept the summer camps full. During the summer of 1997, 20 girls attended each of the four sessions. After that season, organizers decided that 15 participants was the optimum group size, and waiting lists began to accumulate.



*Power Camp girls getting their messages out to a wider world.*

### *Growing pains*

The 1997 season brought changes to the partnership structure and management of the program. Stephanie returned to school to pursue a Master's degree, Willow stayed on to manage the Ottawa program, and Tatiana took some time to travel to Vancouver and explore Power Camp possibilities in that city. By this time, Power Camp Ottawa's funding budget had grown to \$80,000 per year. This amount covered salaries, travel costs, equipment rentals and insurance fees. Over the years, camper fees had increased from \$240 to \$300 per session, but Power Camp had a policy that allowed up to 35 percent of campers to receive subsidies as required, and rates were structured to absorb these costs. Program continuity and staff turnover were ongoing challenges.

Tatiana returned to eastern Canada in 1998 and settled in Montreal, but she continued to train staff in Ottawa and look for ways to sustain the program. Willow had decided to pursue other career avenues and former camp coordinator, Rachel Gouin, took over the Ottawa program leadership. Rachel created a francophone component in 1999 (*Filles d'action*) and that summer, English and French programs ran alongside one another. A leadership program for girls 16 to 18 years was piloted that summer as well.

The University of Ottawa renegotiated its partnership with the program and it was agreed that the university's Women's Resource Centre would take over Power Camp's summer operations. Tatiana and Rachel remained involved with training and managing the partnership, and ensuring that the camps ran smoothly. This arrangement, while practical, did not convey the energy and excitement of the program's early days. By the end of the second summer at

the university, funding reserves had dwindled and the issues of sustainability forced the recognition that the program could not afford to continue operations.

“We learned about the realities associated with youth-driven enterprises,” says Tatiana. “High staff turnover has to be balanced with a sustainable infrastructure in order to maintain programming. Two young women – one a Power Camp alumnus – are currently investigating the possibility of re-establishing the Ottawa program, and the program has matured to the point where we have the resources to support their efforts.”

### *New visions*

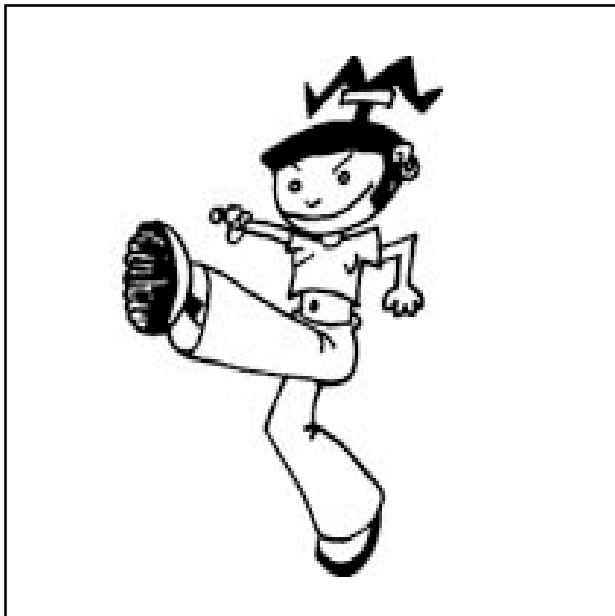
In addition to her other duties, 1999 was the year Tatiana realized that the time had come to initiate a national strategy with the aim of sharing the Power Camp model with communities across Canada.

Power Camp staff had handled a variety of requests for program information, particularly during the first year of operation when the program received local and national media attention. Tatiana and her colleagues had made conference presentations on a variety of female empowerment and health-related topics to Canadian research institutes, government departments and educational organizations.

Tatiana was also well aware of the importance of capturing success stories and sharing information in a comprehensive manner with other young women who were keen to establish their own programs. The Canadian Muscular Dystrophy Association in Alberta, for example, used the camp's principles to design a program specifically for girls living with multiple sclerosis. Power Camp organizers knew that this

camp's success proved it was possible to translate their message of empowerment to any group that traditionally has been ignored or devalued by mainstream society. It became imperative to assemble this kind of learning into a manual.

By the summer of 2001, a program website was established and Power Camp's manual was ready for distribution, thanks in part to more funding from the Trillium Foundation and partnerships with the Students Commission and Canadian Institute for Child Health. By January 2002, more than 60 copies of the manual had been sent across the country. The document is smart, colourful and sassy – girls clearly having fun while sharing an important series of messages, and its generosity of spirit shines through. Tatiana and her co-workers are not only interested in prolonging the life of Power Camp; they also offer plenty of information and advice on setting up an organizational structure to anyone with a good idea – everything from tips for liaising with potential sponsors to designing an exciting series of activities and spinning a successful funding application.



*Energy, enthusiasm and laughter are powerful tools.*

“Getting to this stage was an interesting process,” says Tatiana. “Our relationships with grassroots programs evolved organically and informally. Now we had to figure out if there was any interest in continuing to grow, and what shape that growth would take.”

Tatiana decided to host a meeting in Montreal where she is now living and taking a Master's degree in the Management for National Leadership in the Voluntary Sector (an 18-month degree program co-sponsored by McGill University and the McConnell Family Foundation). The two-day event in November 2001 was attended by eight program representatives. Power Camp has grown to 15 affiliate organizations in cities across the country. “We wanted to discuss the possibilities of continuing our work, but we weren't sure whether a national organizing body was the way to go,” says Tatiana. “It was clear after the first hour of our two-day meeting that all of us wished to formalize a relationship, but it was equally clear that a top-down, central bureaucracy which would collect and distribute funding was not what we wanted.”

By the end of the weekend, it was agreed that a network structure was a workable model and that more effort would be put into expanding the website, strengthening communications through a web server and continuing the tradition of mounting a yearly face-to-face meeting and retreat. The group established a short-term goal of creating a mechanism for selecting a coordinator for each year's meeting.

### *The future of Power Camp*

Tatiana will pursue long-term funding sources; in the meantime, each region will secure its own funding and make its own management decisions. Tatiana recently has completed her

Master's degree course work and will now have to devote some of her energies to finishing a consolidation paper.

Over the course of her studies in the McGill-McConnell program, Tatiana found that many of Power Camp's structures and procedures were affirmed. "We had used basic feminist notions of collaboration, power-sharing and group process to get things on their way," says Tatiana. "Despite a flat, group-directed power structure within each camp experience, it proved necessary to develop operating structures and procedures. Dividing responsibilities and providing feedback and accountability mechanisms are simply efficient working principles. At heart, however, we remain committed to participatory programming and we respect individual differences and needs."

So far, only half of the population has benefited from the Power Camp experience. The November meetings in Montreal allowed discussion of the fact that males have no equivalent organization, and the Toronto WAVES program

(a Power Camp affiliate) will be investigating programming possibilities for young men in the coming year.

Tatiana concludes: "Power Camp's fundamental purpose is to constantly challenge the way our world is organized and create a space for dialogue. The environment we have created with this organization allows these things to happen."

*Anne Makhoul*

*Anne Makhoul works on the 'community stories' series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.*

### **Contact information**

Tatiana Fraser can be reached by e-mail:

[Power\\_camp@videotron.ca](mailto:Power_camp@videotron.ca)

telephone: (514) 948-1112,

address: 282 St. Joseph West  
Montreal, Quebec  
H2V 2N7

Caledon publications are available from Caledon's website at [www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org) and from:

Renouf Publishing Company Limited  
5369 Canotek Road  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1J 9J3

phone: (613) 745-2665

fax: (613) 745-7660

and from Renouf stores at:

71 1/2 Sparks Street, Ottawa (613) 238-8985