

## Teens amp up their rockin' talent, self-esteem

By Curtis Vogel TODAY.com contributor

NBCNews.com

Eighty girls between 8 and 18 years old stand in a circle, holding hands and waiting for a signal to begin. When their instructor gives the cue, one little girl screams at the top of her lungs, squeezes the hand of the girl next to her as she runs out of breath, then the next girl screams with all her might, and so on until all 80 girls have let out their own piercing screams.

No, this isn't some kind of newfangled therapy session. This is what's known as the Scream Circuit at the Rock and Roll Camp for Girls in Portland, Ore. The First Rule of Girls Rock Camp: Be as Loud as You Want to Be. The Second Rule of Girls Rock Camp: No Boys Allowed. The Third Rule of Girls Rock Camp: See Rule Number One.

"Girls are totally socialized to be quiet," says Winner Bell, executive director of Girls Rock Camp. "It's really important for girls growing up to have a space where they can be who they are. They can use their voices, learn from failures, triumph from successes and have positive female role models.

The camp starts on Monday, and during the next five days, the girls will learn a new instrument, form a band, write an original song and perform that song in front of 900 people six days later in the Saturday Showcase. It's a tall order, especially for some of the younger girls whose little fingers can barely cover the strings on their guitars.

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"We do try to make it about the final product," says Kate Walsh, outreach coordinator for Girls Rock Camp, "but we also want it to be about the week, too. We want them to learn a lot about themselves in the process."

Walsh is also the coach for a band of 8-to-10-year-olds who have named themselves The Geodes. Ten-year-old Siena establishes the melody and lyrics of the group's song, "My Time," on the first day of rehearsals, while 10-year-old Molly works on her own solo with additional lyrics. Ellie, also 10, is a steady force as the drummer in the band, with 8-year-old Olivia on guitar and 8-year-old Gaia on keyboards.

By the end of the first day on Monday, The Geodes have established a backbeat, a guitar strum and the first two verses of the song as well as a chorus, but there are some obvious creative differences brewing. By Tuesday, some of the gaps between the girls' ideas become chasms, and arguments among the band cut into valuable rehearsal time.

"We encourage struggling," says Walsh. "We want you to get it wrong a million times so you can get it right that one time."

Ellie's mother, Susan Schmidt, agrees with that philosophy. It's one of the reasons she brought Ellie back to camp after sending her to one of the workshops last winter.

"This has been a really great place for Ellie," says Schmidt, "because she comes here and she has to be part of the group, she has to contribute to the team and be able to get along with everybody."

By Thursday, the disagreements turn into dissension, and Molly walks out of the rehearsal when she feels like the other girls aren't listening to her. Walsh spends the next 30 minutes with Molly, calming her down and working on the lyrics she wants to add to her last solo in the song. Thanks to Walsh's efforts, Molly comes back to rehearsal and apologizes to her bandmates. The girls apologize for hurting Molly's feelings, and suddenly, The Geodes are one again and ready to rock.

"I think it was just some interpersonal conflict that was bound to happen when you throw five 8-to-10-year-olds in a

room that don't know each other and give them loud instruments," says Walsh.

While the week has been stressful for some of the little girls, one of the older girl groups has been clicking since the first rehearsal. Four of the members of Won Ton Destruction (Ashley, Maddie, Zoe and Hanna) go to the same high school in nearby Vancouver, Wash., so there is already some familiarity in the group. Toss in an experienced 17-year-old guitarist named Aspen from Eugene, Ore., and a 12-year-old drummer named Amelia from the Portland area, and you've got a great mix of creative juices that results in a catchy tune on their first day of rehearsal.

As the week progresses, coaches of other bands are peeking in to listen to Won Ton Destruction's song, "Once More With Cowbell," during rehearsals. One of the coaches likes the song so much, she samples it and put it in her phone as a ringtone.

"They're a group of really happy, eccentric girls and that's exactly what their music is," says Won Ton Destruction's coach, 17-year-old Cassie Scyphers. "It's really happy sounding and really eccentric."

By the last day of rehearsal on Friday, the members of Won Ton Destruction are working on their timing and fine-tuning their solos, but they're so relaxed that the other girls dance around the room when one of the band members is doing a solo. The buzz around the camp is that Won Ton Destruction's performance will be the one to watch in the Saturday Showcase.

When Saturday arrives, 900 parents and friends show up at the sold-out concert at the Bagdad Theater in downtown Portland. Most of the girls have kept quiet about their experiences at camp all week, so the parents aren't sure what to expect.

"They are just so excited to be together," says Ellie's mom, Susan Schmidt, "to finally be sharing what they have spent all week putting together, and I can't wait to see it. I really can't."

The five members of The Geodes take the stage to kick off the Saturday Showcase. From the first beat of the bass drum, Ellie keeps a steady rhythm throughout the song, Siena hits her marks during the verses and Molly gets her solo during the three choruses, including the new lyrics she wrote on Thursday for the big finish of the song. It doesn't sound like much to the uninitiated, but for The Geodes' parents and the camp coaches who have been watching them grow and develop throughout the week, it's an impressive feat when the five little girls make it through the whole song with no major gaffes in front of 900 people. It's probably their best performance of the song of the whole week, including some of their strongest rehearsals.

Sixteen more bands from Rock Camp perform over the next hour and a half, singing tunes about everything from being lonely to global warming. Then Won Ton Destruction takes the stage to close out the show.

Amelia hits the cowbell to start the count, Zoe kicks in with the catchy melody of the keyboards, then Aspen strums the lead guitar part that pulses throughout the song. Within seconds, the crowd is rushing to the stage for the first time to dance at the girls' feet. Ashley is all flourish and energy as she sings and bounds around the stage, and Aspen nails the guitar solo that she's been practicing all week. The girls of Won Ton Destruction turn into rock stars right before the audience's eyes. By the end of the song, everyone is on their feet, giving the girls a standing ovation as they leave the stage.

The Saturday Showcase is the highlight of the week for the girls, but they will also remember the little moments where they contributed to their band and found out that they have a creative voice that's worth sharing in a fun, safe environment.

"The week has just been so amazing," says Amelia, Won Ton Destruction's drummer, "that I don't think any of us are really going to forget any part of it."

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