



# Girl Power

A middle school in Asheville covers the three Rs with some TLC to match. By **Modesta Zapata**, photography **Meg McKinney**

The animated chatter of uniformed students eagerly embracing their education echoes through Hanger Hall School for Girls.

With the name of their school emblazoned across their shirts, some gather on the steps, while others relax in rocking chairs on the wraparound porch. None older than 14, they're smart, full of energy, and happy.

Keeping them that way is the mission of Hanger Hall in Asheville, an institution dedicated to the care and education of students in grades six to eight. "Our motto is 'Nurturing the girl and empowering the emerging woman,'" says Howard Hanger, the school's founder and headmaster. Together he, his students, and his staff have been changing the face of middle school education for girls in North Carolina for nearly 10 years.

**A Growing Success** A father and minister, Howard's progressive outlook led him to think beyond the ordinary parochial school for his own two daughters. He especially wanted a place where they could receive the best education possible without having to go through the social strain that girls experience in the middle school years. After months of research, he and Asheville-area educators took matters into their own hands and opened Hanger Hall in Howard's home in 1999.

"Girls have needs that can't be met in coed situations," says Howard. "There are no ugly girls here because 'ugly' is defined by who the boys don't pay attention to. This school takes that whole element out of the mix."

Hanger Hall was the only all-girls middle school in North Carolina at the time of its opening, and the school soon grew beyond its original three sixth graders and one teacher. Now more than 60 students attend Hanger Hall and enjoy an atmosphere where "nobody gets left out and everybody is in the front row," says Howard.

Some might be surprised that teenage girls would relish a boy-free school. But Hanger Hall proved so appealing to its young charges and their parents that classes moved to a newer, bigger school at Crest Mountain. In classrooms overlooking Asheville and the surrounding mountains, the girls take their lessons in modern, brightly painted classrooms with a curriculum that includes Appalachian Music Studies as well as more common subjects from sociology to science.

**The Girl Inside** Howard designed the school with his daughters in mind but takes pride in the fact that other girls have been able to discover themselves here. "At this school, they're allowed to just be girls," says Howard. "We want them to express themselves from the inside out. If it's all about body, lips, and makeup, self-esteem then becomes based on how they look."

Parents such as Maureen Muller see their children thriving in the more intimate environment. She moved with her daughters, Kathryn and Patricia, to the Asheville area after Hurricane Katrina damaged their home near New Orleans. One of the reasons they decided to stay was because of the "loving environment with this school family," Maureen says. "Children's happiness is crucial."





### Howard's Textbook

With years of success at Hanger Hall, Howard is offering a primer for teaching well-adjusted girls: *A Precious Window of Time*. Coauthored by child-development specialist Dr. Vicki Garlock, the book reflects lessons Howard has learned and instilled through the experience of running the school. "Life works if it's allowed to shift," the authors write. "Kids need parameters, but it doesn't mean they can't step over them. They need to know there's structure, but there's fluidity too."

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** All students, administrators, and faculty circle up each Monday morning to say "The Hanger Hall School for Girls Pledge." The school reflects founder Howard Hanger's belief that adolescent girls deserve an extraordinary educational experience. Severine Gaubert, who teaches dance and French, leads the girls in dances from around the world.



**Pushing Boundaries** Hanger Hall courses cover not only basic education but also what it means to be a woman in the 21st century, says Howard. With community service; pool parties; movie nights; and trips to places ranging from Charleston, South Carolina, to Mexico, Hanger Hall offers uncommon experiences to middle school girls.

The school provides overnight orientations to the school environment; "Big Sisters," older girls who help younger students with problems; and "Forum," in which working women come to school to tell the girls about careers. Students benefit from "Group," where they discuss various religious, personal, and social issues, and "Observation," designed to spark conversation among students on a number of topics. In the Observation exercise, the girls take turns giving their one-word thoughts on the subject at hand.

When that subject is their school, Hanger Hall's students offer observations that tell a lot about the impact of an all-girl education in Asheville: Friends. Fun. Family. Awesome. Amazing. Different. Together. Happiness. ●

**For more information:** Visit [www.hangerhall.org](http://www.hangerhall.org).

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HOWARD HANGER