

fall in love with an idea

Many eminent women of history learned to develop survival strategies and courage as young girls.

They let their brains be their guide. ASU's Barbara Kerr has gone from being educated as a gifted girl to studying and nurturing the talents of today's gifted girls and creative adults.

BY MELISSA D. OLSON

Being smart, or gifted, is not enough, especially for teenage girls. High achievement test scores, genius intelligence quotients and straight A's tell as little about a young woman's life as a table of contents does for a celebrity's biography. What matters is the passion and energy a heroine brings to fulfilling her dreams. Educational psychologist Barbara Kerr calls this the ability to fall in love with an idea. "If there is one thing that you can do to help gifted girls, it is to teach them to fall in love with an idea," says Kerr, a professor in Arizona State University's College of Education. "That will give them the strength to overcome all other barriers."

Kerr profiles artists, scientists, writers, activists, and musicians who overcame childhood obstacles to become eminent women in her book *Smart Girls Two: A New Psychology of Girls, Women and Giftedness*.

For example, writer and political activist Maya Angelou was 8 years old when she was raped by her mother's boyfriend. Scientist Marie Curie was 11 when her mother died. She grew up in a Poland tyrannized by Russia. Rigoberta Menchu rose above poverty and discrimination in Guatemala to win a Nobel Peace Prize as an activist for Indian rights.

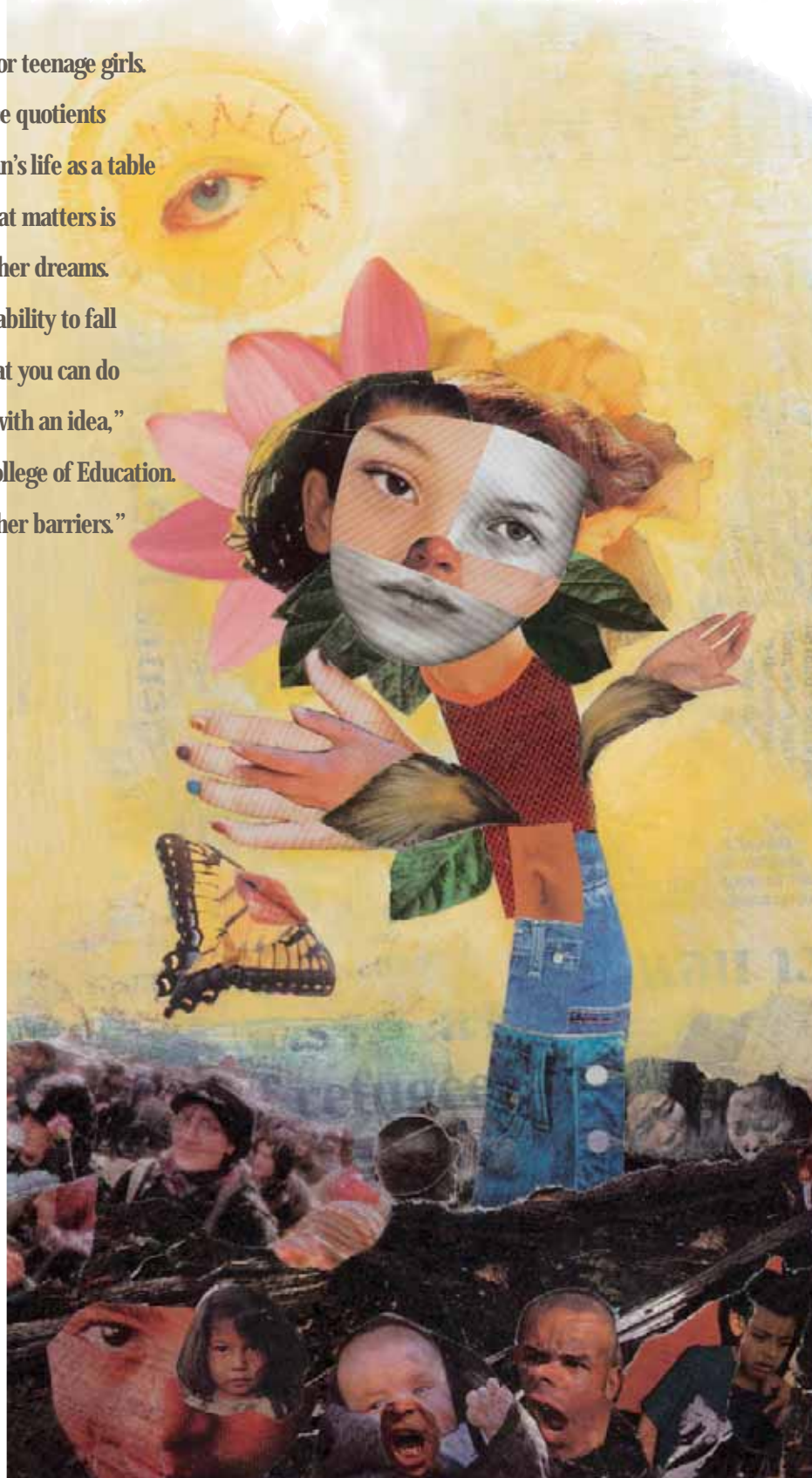
"Basically, most eminent women were at-risk girls," Kerr says. "If not poverty, then other issues in their families put them at risk. They had to develop survival strategies and courage. Put that together with intelligence and you've got a powerful formula for achieving goals."

Each of these women became intensely involved with an idea and found her life's work—pursuing a career as a writer for Angelou, performing groundbreaking experiments in chemistry and physics for Curie, becoming a voice for the poor and oppressed for Menchu.

But how does someone help a gifted girl, especially an at-risk teen, today?

"Nourish them intellectually, guide them, love them, challenge them, leave them alone to fall in love with an idea in their own way," Kerr says.

Kerr lists time alone to think among the traits that link the eminent women she studied. Other traits include voracious reading habits, the refusal to acknowledge gender limitations, and finding mentors.





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—BARBARA KERR



Giftedness has formed the core of Kerr’s life and work since she attended a special school for bright children in the early 1960s. She has gone from being educated as a gifted girl to studying and nurturing the talents of today’s gifted girls and creative adults. Talent development is her mission.

“I believe we all have a responsibility to use our gifts, to actualize them as much as possible, and to make a contribution to society,” she says. “I felt it was important to discover why women in particular did not fulfill their own dreams and goals.

“Bright girls receive rewards for intellectual achievements throughout girlhood. Then the rules change. When they are 12 or 13 years old, social achievements become the most important. Many girls resent that shift.”

Recently, Kerr and Sharon Robinson-Kurpius, an **asu** professor of psychology in education, completed the three-year “Talented At-Risk Girls: Encouragement and Training for Sophomores” (**targets**) project.

The researchers asked high schools to recommend girls who were getting good grades in math and science but who were at-risk because of alcohol or substance abuse, problem pregnancies, family financial woes, and other crises.

“The teachers and counselors had no problem identifying these girls,” Kerr says. “Almost every teacher has a girl who she really worries about.”

Among the girls was 15-year-old Carletta (not her real name), originally from El Salvador but now living in central Phoenix. Several things were interfering with her studies. She works at a fast-food restaurant to help her mother pay rent. She helps care for her younger brother. And she must deal daily with the physical and emotional scars from her rape and her father’s “disappearance” in El Salvador.

Despite many absences and a few trancies, Carletta managed to learn English and excel in mathematics. While other girls were thinking about boys, Carletta was torn between earning money for her mother and losing herself in schoolwork.

Getting A’s on tests and homework seemed to be the only things that helped her rise above her family’s poverty and sad history. Yet Carletta was considering dropping out to work full time.

The **targets** project reinforced Carletta’s love for school and offered her hope for the future.

Few in Carletta’s family had finished high school, let alone gone to college. **targets** brought Carletta, and other smart but troubled girls like her, to **asu** for two days. Once on

campus, she received career counseling that raised her self expectations. Instead of using her math skills to work as a bank teller or bookkeeper, Carletta saw that she could become an accountant, a finance manager, or possibly a chief executive officer someday.

“So many women consider going into business at lower levels and don’t understand that they can go into administration,” Kerr says. “They can become leaders rather than worker bees.”

The same philosophy applies to other fields. In health care, Kerr urges girls who want to become nurses to think about medical school, too. For young women interested in teaching, she suggests pursuing an especially challenging field such as special education or even child psychology.

At **asu**, the girls visited laboratories where women scientists worked. Carletta learned how engineers use math to build everything from the earthbound—mining operations, bridges, and skyscrapers—to the boundless—space stations and probes headed beyond our solar system.

That night, a woman neurosurgeon and other potential mentors joined the **targets** girls in a dormitory to play *Trivial Pursuit*, watch a documentary about Rigoberta Menchu, eat popcorn, and talk.

The project paired each teenager with a pen pal, a counselor in training at **asu**. During the next year, a counselor’s letters would convince Carletta that she could go to college and pursue a scientific career.

In addition to ideas, the girls received concrete information about college and financial aid. Many **targets** participants—American Indians, Hispanics, blacks, and whites from low-income families—qualify for scholarships. However, most of the girls didn’t know such support existed, Kerr says.

Also, the teens learned how to build networks of supportive adults and ask for their help. One girl might need to say, “Mom, I want you to take me to see college campuses. And will you make an appointment with me at the career center?”

Another teen might ask, “Mom, will you fill out a financial statement so we can try to get financial aid for me?”

For Carletta, the request might be, “Mom, will you make sure that I don’t drop out this year? Even when I cry and scream, make me stay.”

The TARGETS project was supported by the National Science Foundation. For more information, contact Barbara Kerr, Ph.D., Division of Psychology in Education, College of Education, 602.965.3384.