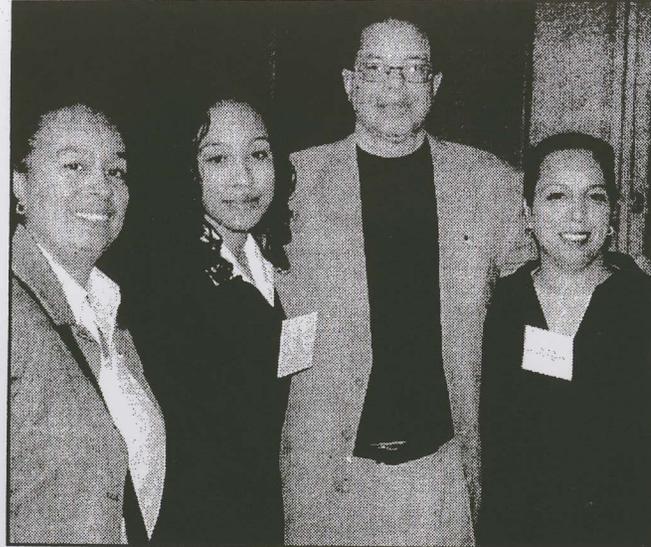




Some of NYC GirlsREACH's inaugural alumnae.



NYC GirlsREACH Graduate Elizabeth Marzan of East Harlem with her family.
Photo Credit: Chuck Gottlieb

First annual NYC GirlsREACH program celebrates graduation

By Michael O'Brien

June may be seven months away, but the class of 2006 just graduated. From NYC GirlsREACH, that is.

On Wednesday Nov. 1, 2006, the inaugural class of NYC GirlsREACH — designed to connect high-potential young women with successful professional women — celebrated their graduation from the program at the Oxygen Media Headquarters in Manhattan's Meatpacking District.

A City initiative of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, NYC GirlsREACH was a collaborative effort of the NYC Commission on Women's Issues (CWI) and the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). "The CWI approached us concerned, quite frankly," said DYCD Commissioner Jeanne B. Mullgrav, "that young women didn't have a foundation in the women's movement and didn't visualize themselves in leadership roles."

To teach the 49 participants — all of whom are current high school juniors or seniors, who got involved with NYC GirlsREACH through the In-School Summer Employment Program — about business skills and leadership, while also preparing them for college, NYC GirlsREACH incorporated workshops and summer internships at both public and private sectors, including Ernst and Young LLP, JP Morgan Chase, Macy's, the Moody's Foundation, Lehman Brothers, the Bank of New York, HarperCollins Publishers, Bloomberg LP, and various New York City government agencies.

"It's a seven-week program," explained Zaily Valoy, a 17-year-old who was nominated for the program by the East Harlem Community Council for Development, of the six-week internship preceded by a weeklong orientation session. Valoy, who is of Dominican and Colombian descent, interned at Ernst

and Young LLP with seven other young women. At her internship, Valoy learned different business terms and techniques, while also doing a research project on H&M, the company of her choice. "After this program, I'm looking into business," said Valoy, a Bard High School Early College junior, of her college plans.

The same could be said of Elizabeth Marzan, a Puerto Rican-American junior at St. Jean's Baptist High School. For her future major, Marzan was initially thinking of psychology or one of the helping professions, but NYC GirlsREACH has inspired her to pursue business. "It boosted my self-esteem; I feel like it made me a stronger, better person," the former tomboy said of her experience with NYC GirlsREACH.

Oxygen's Senior Vice President of External Affairs Andrea Bernstein was the evening's first speaker at the NYC GirlsREACH commencement. "We really feel a great affinity for the program," she said. "We hope

we can help girls and women realize their dreams." Crediting the young girls for their achievements, Bernstein also mentioned that Amelia Earhart was just 23 when she learned to fly.

The large warehouse filled with laughter, as the next speaker — NYC Deputy Mayor Dennis Walcott — let everyone know that he, too, watches the Oxygen channel. "The world is all yours," the father of three daughters told the 49 graduates. "We know you will do extremely well as you progress forward in life."

Following Walcott, Mullgrav congratulated the girls again, as she encouraged them to spend the remainder of their lives having — and sharing — ideas.

On behalf of her fellow graduates, Barbie Rodriguez, who interned at HarperCollins Publishers, was next to speak. Rodriguez credited the NYC GirlsREACH program with introducing her to strong women and teaching her to embrace what she has to reach her full potential. "Now we know we can make possibilities into realities," Rodriguez said.

Indeed, NYC GirlsREACH was a learning experience for both interns and mentors involved. Bank of New York Vice President and Products Manager May Ling Yip recalled initially meeting her pupil over the summer. Yip described Ariel Bethea, currently a junior at Lehman High School in the Bronx, as soft-spoken and shy, and was amazed to see her personal progress at the graduation ceremony. "I was so impressed with her professional look and her confidence," Yip said. "I was totally amazed; it was a wonderful experience for both of us."