

## EDUCATION

# Why this nonprofit is using power tools to empower girls

Girls at Work is using hands-on learning and the socratic method to give girls confidence and help them get jobs in the trades

By [Amanda Gokee](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 23, 2024, 2 hours ago



Stacy Taylor Brown, a climate educator for Revision Energy, leads a class on renewable energy for Girls at Work, a nonprofit based in Manchester, N.H. AMANDA GOKEE/GLOBE STAFF

MANCHESTER — When she was 8, Kaylee Richard started going to Girls at Work, a nonprofit after-school program that uses power tools and the socratic method to empower girls.

At first, she was skeptical of the woodworking program. “I was just like, I’m not going, I don’t want to, none of my friends are going to be there,” she said.

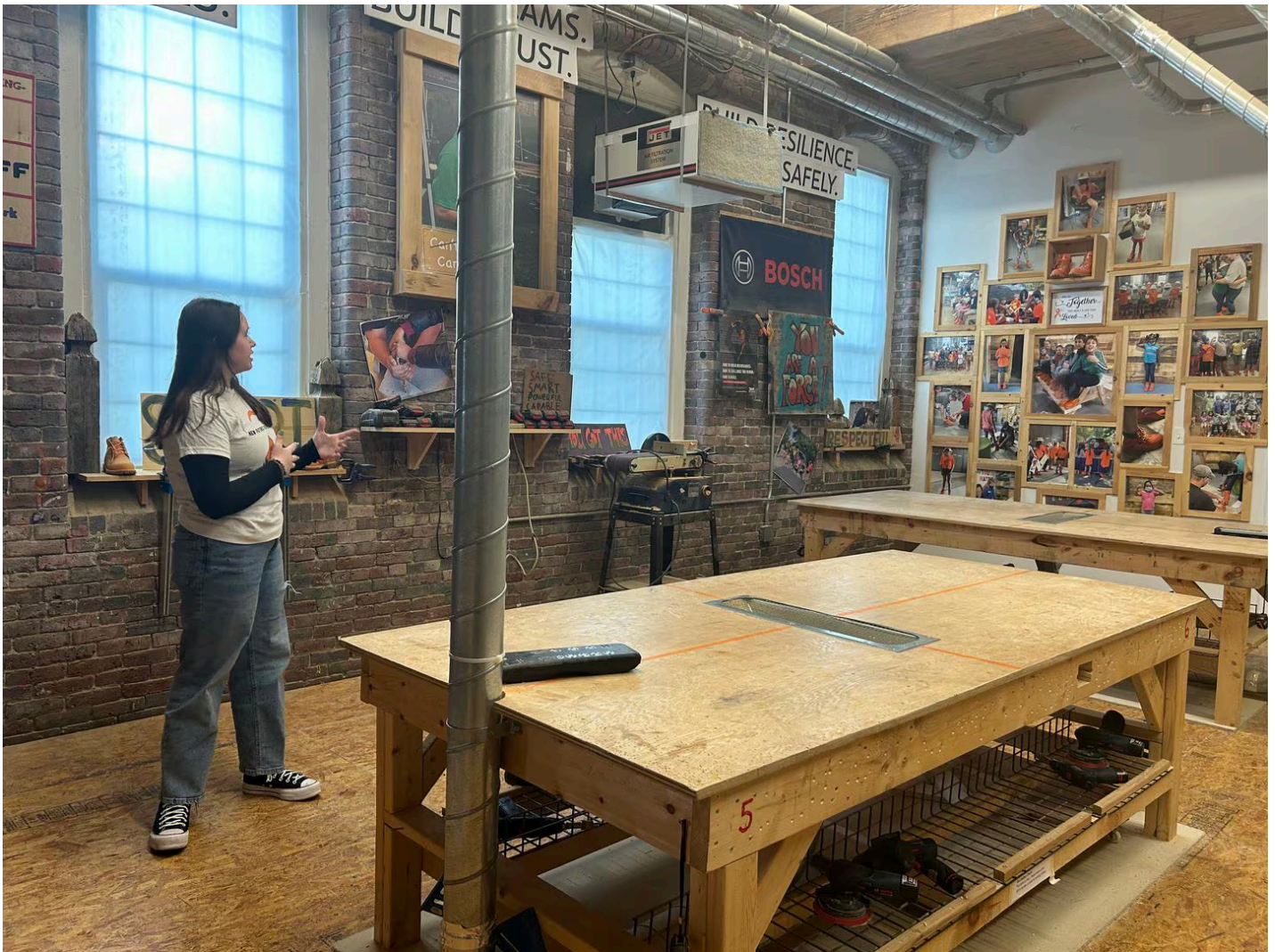
But she quickly grew to love the program. Almost a decade later, the 17-year-old has become a program director at the nonprofit and is encouraging girls to consider a job in the trades.

“It’s not about woodworking at all, and I didn’t get that as a kid,” she said.

At the core of the program, Richard now understands, are the skills kids gain that they can apply to their day-to-day lives. Around 95 percent of students in the program are on a scholarship and come from under-resourced homes.

“Our kids are typically stuck in a box,” Richard said. “They’re thinking about what their parents are doing and how that’s their future. We want them to know that that’s not their future. They can change their future.”





Kaylee Richard gives a tour of the Girls at Work facility in Manchester. Richard started as a participant in the program when she was 8 and now, at 17, has become a program director. AMANDA GOKEE/GLOBE STAFF

In the woodworking class, kids are given pre-cut pieces of wood they need to complete a project. Then it's up to them to figure out how they go together to assemble a peg board, a table, or a desk. The instructors ask questions but let the kids find their own answers.

“When they walk out of this building, they feel so much more powerful, knowing that they built this themselves,” Richard said.

Girls at Work is also a way to introduce girls to the possibility of career paths historically reserved for men: where they can make good money without taking on student debt.

In an after-school class on renewable energy, Stacy Taylor Brown makes her pitch to a group of four girls: What about becoming an electrician?

Taylor Brown is a climate educator for the solar company Revision Energy. First, she has the students imagine the world they want to live in 20 years from now by creating a collage that depicts how it looks and feels. Will there be snow and fresh water in that world? Then, she explains there are many ways they can help build that future. Working as an electrician is just one.

One girl named Leah said she wants to travel a lot, have a nice house, clean air, and be rich. Another one named Harper is particularly excited about a future with lots of chicken nuggets. Richard sits in, urging the girls to take the collaging seriously.

“What I really want you to know is that these futures are absolutely possible,” Taylor Brown says.

“Are you laughing because you’re thinking about your chicken nugget future?” she asks Harper. “I hope it happens for you.”

Solar panel in hand, Taylor Brown explains there is going to be a big need for electricians because green technology is part of tackling the climate crisis.

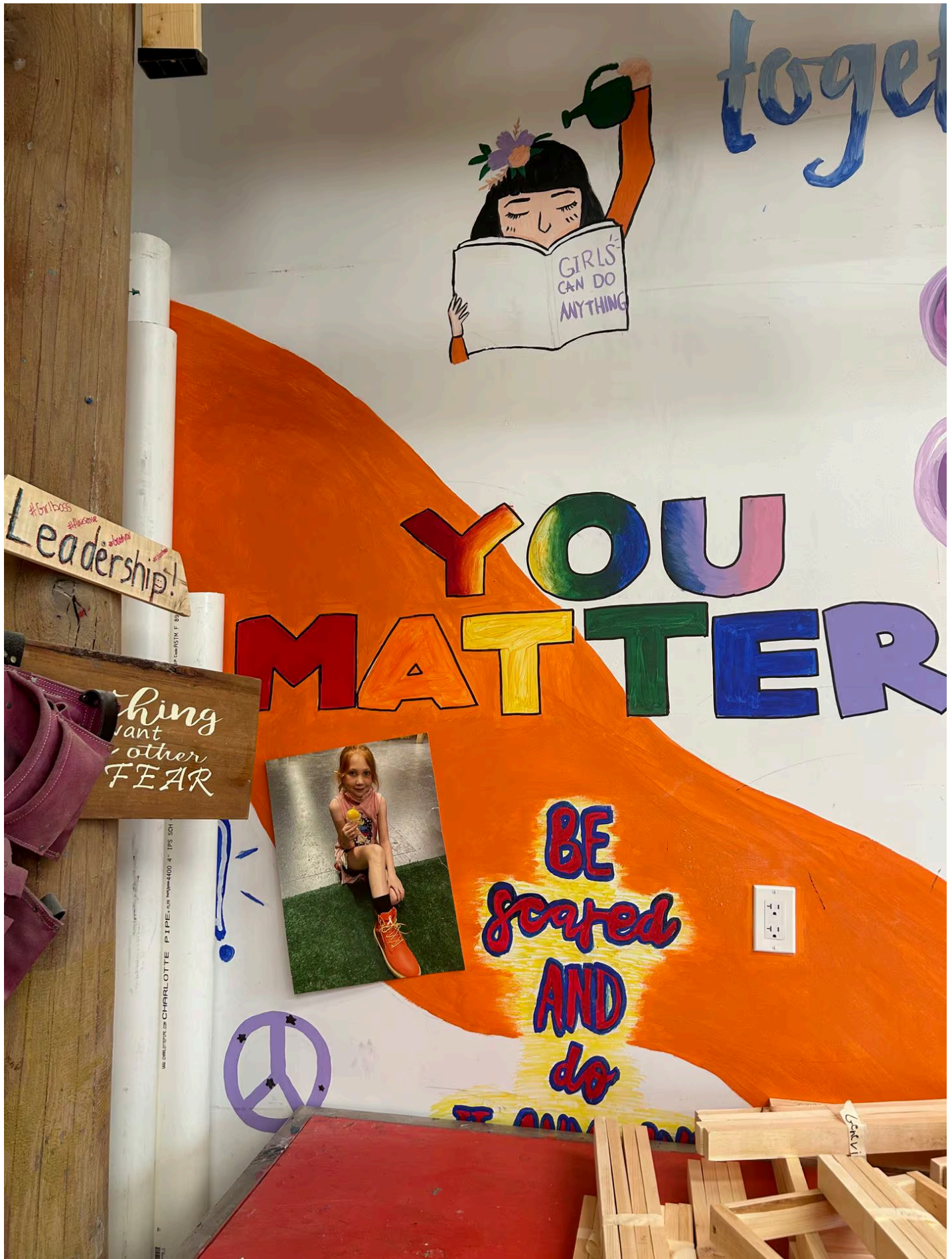
“We need [a million more electricians](#) in the next 10 years,” she tells them. “And without significant intervention, we’re going to be about 600,000 short.”

She explains that Revision Energy has a paid apprenticeship program that provides on-the-job training, and that master electricians can earn up to \$150,000 per year, without having to take on student debt. (The median wage for electricians in 2023 was \$61,590, with the top 10 percent earning more than \$104,180, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#).)

The girls pepper Taylor Brown with questions: “Do you have to do math?” (The answer: A little bit.) Will the pay for these jobs go down in the future if more people enter the field? (Taylor Brown said she’s not worried about that happening anytime soon.) What’s a masters degree?



Then, the girls try their own hand at pipe bending with a tool electricians use to shape the pipes that protect electrical wiring from rain and the elements. They take to the task with enthusiasm and a bit of chaos.



Empowering artwork and affirmations are splashed across the walls at Girls at Work. AMANDA GOKEE/GLOBE STAFF



Around the country, around [2 percent of electricians are women](#), Taylor Brown said in an interview before class.

“This is such an amazing opportunity to build out this workforce and give women jobs that pay really well,” she said. “They’ve just been traditionally locked out because of societal dictates and not abilities.”

Girls at Work recently started partnering with tech companies that could teach classes in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics, or STEAM.

For the companies, it’s an opportunity to introduce young people to their field at a time when it’s challenging to hire. For Girls at Work, it was a way to grow their programming and provide more classes for young people who are eager to learn.

“The kids, they need somewhere to be. We want them to stay with us,” Richard said.

Girls at Work was founded 24 years ago by Elaine Hamel, who still serves as the executive director. She said she started the program after she took in a child of neighbors who were addicted to drugs.

“I left college to raise this kid and I didn’t have the means to do it,” she said. She wanted to send the girl to summer camp, but couldn’t afford it. Instead, she worked out an arrangement where she would teach the girls at the camp how to build, in exchange for camp tuition.

Hamel said after that first week of teaching woodworking, she started getting calls from camp directors around New England. The program grew from there.

“A lot of girls figure out who they are and what they’re made of,” she said.

How did she start using the socratic method? Trial and error, she said. There were a lot of girls and only one of her. She realized if she stepped back after teaching kids how to use the tools, they could figure out what to create.

“Today we don’t give them answers, just questions because when they start thinking, now they’re critically thinking,” she said. (She didn’t realize it was called the socratic method until a group of doctoral researchers studying the program told her.)

Richard has become familiar with being on the receiving end of that approach. When she was disappointed in a trades career fair geared toward boys and men, Hamel asked her, “How are you going to fix it?”

“And we were like, we’re not. What do you mean?” Richard said. She ended up creating a career fair of her own just for girls called New Futures for Females Career Day. Now in its third iteration, it’s grown from 14 to 22 employers, each required to bring at least one female representative.

Some of the companies like Revision are continuing to work with the program through after-school classes.

For her part, Richard won’t be at the program much longer. She’s planning to go to Simmons University for college. She’s not entirely sure what she wants to do but is considering studying sociology. She thinks it would be a way to keep helping the kids she’s met at Girls at Work.

“They go through a lot of traumatic things at home,” she said. “I think studying sociology might help me continue helping them.”

“That’s my ultimate goal,” she said, “to help others.”

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