

## Grateful for Girls Rule

Mackenzie Will Take the Experience with Her Graduation day is about both accomplishments and new beginnings. Many things, including school, friends, family and extra-curricular activities/clubs will continue to shape graduating seniors.

Watertown High School 2017 graduate, Mackenzie Kleen, credits all those things for making her who she is today. However, she has special gratitude for the Girls Rule program at Bramble Park Zoo. Girls Rule is a local Roots & Shoots based program which has been sponsored in part by Watertown Area Community Foundation Women & Giving donors since the annual program began in 2008. The program has both a class for elementary and middle-school aged girls.

It was really hard for me when I moved to Watertown in fifth-grade, Kleen said. "I was really quiet and shy." I'm not anymore. "I am so much more confident. Girls Rule teaches you to stick up for yourself, be yourself and be the best you that you can be." Kleen was in one of the early groups of Girls Rule participants. She continued in the program through 9<sup>th</sup>-grade. For the last two years, Kleen has been on the other side, helping Barb Struwe, Girls Rule instructor; and Jaime Stricker, zoo educator, plan the classes and do the paperwork, as well as mentor and teach the group.

"Mackenzie is pretty outgoing and willing to try anything," Struwe said. "She is super organized and enthusiastic and has accomplished any task I've asked her to do. But more than that, she has a really, really nice way of connecting with the girls."

"I have learned so many skills..., team building, good manners, how to be respectful and I'm an overall better person" said Kleen. "Now, being able to teach it, is amazing!"



"Amazing," is a word Kleen uses a lot to describe her Girls Rule experience and where it continues to lead her. She has competed in several baking competitions placing in two state contests and also competed at the national level. "Girls Rule helped me by getting me out of my comfort zone to help me try new things," she said. Those new things have also included jobs, the drama club (Kleen did the sound for the three one-acts this year), Peer Helpers, TUCKS, and the Watertown Healthy Youth coalition.

"I've had the pleasure of knowing Mackenzie on several levels," said Wendy Olson, WHS Project Success coordinator. "I first met her in Peer Helpers where she was actively involved with many projects, conferences and trainings. Mackenzie has leadership qualities, creative thinking skills and a great sense of humor." Our paths crossed again with her involvement in the Girls Rule group. They recently had a field trip to Olson's ranch to participate in an equine-assisted learning session. "She gently directs the girls while keeping everyone on task," Olson said of Kleen.

"Many of the girls don't walk an easy track," Struwe continued. "Some of the girls in Mackenzie's group didn't finish school." But Mackenzie is a success story and what Girls Rule is all about. "Girls Rule is supported by strong women and building strong women – Mackenzie is totally applicable of that!" Girls Rule has truly come full circle for Mackenzie. "She has grown so much. She is not afraid of a challenge. Mackenzie is a role model now."

Kleen plans to attend Black Hills State University this fall with a major in theater arts and mass communications and a minor in business. Her goals are to live in California or New York pursuing a career in radio, television or even that of a wedding planner. Kleen says she is open to a lot of options and has the confidence to try them because of her Girls Rule experience.

Wherever she goes, Kleen says Girls Rule will continue to make a difference and she'll never truly say 'goodbye' to the experience or the people. "A friend I met in Girls Rule is my best friend to this day," she added. As for the middle school group that she has helped the past two years, "I'll miss 'my girls,' but I have all their Facebook addresses so I can stay in touch."

