

FEATURE |

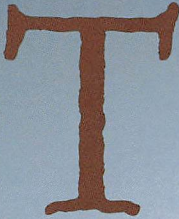
# a badass rodeo of women

A photograph of a dry, hilly landscape with sparse vegetation under a clear sky. The terrain is rugged and brownish, with scattered dark green shrubs and small trees. The sky is a uniform, light brown color, suggesting a hazy or overcast day. The overall tone is warm and arid.

THE RED ANTS PANTS FOUNDATION  
GIRL'S LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

BY MEGAN CRAWFORD

IMAGE BY AMANDA SWEENEY



The Red Ants Pants Foundation has been cultivating a network in rural and agricultural communities across Montana by creating grants for small businesses, empowering women through self-reliance, and for the past three years, teaching young women how to be leaders in their communities through the Girls Leadership Program (GLP). Open to female Montana residents starting their junior year of high school, the GLP pairs 8 mentees with 8 mentors and professional facilitators to develop a community leadership project. In developing their project, participants are provided with an inclusive space of support, accountability, and assistance as needed through their one-on-one mentorships. Over a series of three weekend retreats and the Red Ants Pants Music Festival, mentors and mentees come together to learn from each other and take new skills and knowledge back to their Montana communities.

That's the powerful thing about effective mentorship— it's a two-way street. It's more than a teacher and a student; it's nurtured space, tended to like an early spring garden. Tomatoes provide the shade that carrots need, carrots aerate the soil for healthy tomato roots, carrots repel onion flies and onions repel carrot flies. The best mentorships exist in symbiosis, and it's clear that the Girls Leadership Program has grown a much-needed garden. A network of young women and mentors who are connected across the state, across disciplines, backgrounds, and experience.

Talking with three mentee alumni over a zoom call made me look back at my last two years of high school, and I can confidently say that even in just one meeting, it's apparent that these women have learned and grown in ways that took me *years* to figure out. They *are* community leaders, full stop.

I spoke with Sarah Calhoun, owner of Red Ants Pants and founder of the RAPF, mentors Krystle and Amy, and mentees Ruby, Jady, and Maida. All three mentees are now part of the newly launched RAPF GLP Alumni Network. Through that conversation, I learned about the abundance of female empowerment this program encourages and the ways in which mentorship is being grown across Montana through programs like the GLP.

“It was really empowering to be united with other women around the state,” Maida, a mentee alumni, points out. “I think, in Montana, we have this big sense of community... but we are separated.” With a landmass of 140,040 square miles but a population of about 1,080,000, Montana is spread out— there are about seven people per square mile.

So, how do you build a community that spans the vastness of the state? You meet in the middle.

White Sulphur Springs sits in the Smith River Valley and is home to the Red Ants Pants company. Over three weekends, the RAPF GLP hosts retreats at a ranch in central Montana— fall, winter, and spring— and members are welcomed to the Red Ants Pants Music Festival in the summer. Between the retreats, participants work one-on-one with mentors, attend webinars, and develop community projects. And the connections live on beyond the program year, as Ruby, another mentee alumni, notes: “the community has been absolutely amazing— getting to come together three years later and still have that mentorship and still have these friendships and everything that comes with it is amazing. It’s really changed my sense of community... it gave me a little family.”

It’s a common theme in our zoom call: community, empowerment, unity, leadership, learning. An accountable support system— a good ol’ girl’s club in Montana. Connected despite distance in land or age.

“It’s a societal norm, oftentimes, for women to compete with one another or not hold one another up,” Krystle, who’s been a mentor for three years, points out. “This program really does an incredible job of shattering that and creating a different collective.” Learning from fellow mentors is an added layer to the RAPF GLP. But, of course, there’s the other side of mentorship: “what’s cool about being a mentor is not having the answers and being okay with that,” Krystle says. You can simultaneously teach and be

taught— no one knows it all. But when people can come together in a communal environment, a safe space, and learn from each other, the cracks of those unknown answers can be more easily filled.

“More women deserve to learn these kinds of skills and lessons at a younger age so that we can have more justice in the world,” Krystle points out.

Amy began her Red Ants Pants journey as a chainsaw training instructor, part of the Timber Skills Workshop— Calhoun welcomed her into the RAPF GLP as a mentor this year. “For generations to come, we can have this foundation of women who are in this support group... we all have this commonality and place to come together,” she reflects. That again, despite differences in hometown or age, a rural network can flourish and the garden can continue to grow.

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Over the course of the program, participants design service projects and learn the intricacies of idea development, planning, and management. Of course, this is with the addition of being young women in a traditionally male-dominant state.

Ruby planned a basketball camp for junior high girls and kids in Manhattan, Montana, and worked with Amy on building the idea. “We planned for months and months,” she recalls, but with a change in coaches and obstacles along the way, the basketball camp fell through. “Amy was there to help me with my community project, but she also helped me through life stuff, and I’ll forever be so thankful for that.” Ruby also spoke about growth mindset at camps and assisted in community service projects, including the role of assistant basketball coach for the local junior high during her senior year. “Even though I didn’t get a project done, I still completed a lot and gained a lot from the mentorship I had with Amy.”

“I think it just evolved!” Amy chimes in. “You did



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it; it just evolved throughout the year.”



Outside of Ennis, Maida built a 1.5-mile long trail along a pond system for her community project. She had three goals: create an area for community members to safely recreate, enhance the wildlife habitat, and educate the community about the surrounding wildlife habitat. At her high school’s shop, she led a class to make birdhouses for the trail, and there’s a memorial bench for one of the community’s members. The trail also has bridges that are wheelchair accessible, creating a space the entire community could enjoy.

“When Maida did her trail opening, I got to go,” Ruby recalls, “and she gave a super amazing speech— we got to walk the trail, and it was

really wet and rainy, but she made it so much fun. You could really see how much her community supported her.” The trail, called Willow’s Trail, is located just a couple miles from Ennis and is open to everyone.



Initially, Jaydn wanted to designate a KidsPack food program for her local high school— there were meal provisions in place for elementary and junior high students, but nothing available for high school students. They had free and reduced lunches at school, but nothing was provided outside of school. After working with her mentor, Krystle, and her community, Jaydn set out to make a food pantry for the high school in Boulder, Montana.



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“I didn’t have a lot of community support,” she points out. “There were many mornings when I’d get up at 6am and go to the school, work on the food pantry, and stay for hours after school.” Starting out with county-wide food drives, Jaydn placed drop boxes wherever she could. While there was still some reluctance from towns in Jefferson County, Jaydn got the community together and raised 280 pounds of food donations.

After that food drive, Jaydn reached out to food banks to build partnerships. Gallatin Valley Food Bank made weekly donations and ended up signing a partnership at the end of the year, but other food banks weren’t so accepting.

Now, three years later, the food pantry is fully sustainable, has yearly drives, is still partnered with Gallatin Valley Food Bank, and is under

a grant called Cole’s Pantry (a nonprofit based in Billings). Through her work with the food pantry, Jaydn was able to apply for scholarships, was named a State Honoree for the Prudential Spirit of Community Awards, and received a US Presidential award.

“Krystle was so awesome through it all,” Jaydn adds, “she helped me not give up.”



Through the alumni network, attendees have been able to connect despite not being in the same program year. “It’s been neat to see the cross-pollination between the different cohorts,” Sarah Calhoun, owner of Red Ants Pants and founder of the RAPF GLP mentions. In the distance created by COVID, the RAPF GLP has still

flourished through zoom meetings and webinars. “It was really intimidating at first,” Krystle notes. “We haven’t met the girls or fellow mentors in real life.” But despite the distance, screens, and zoom burnout, the online retreats still created a unique collective space.

The foundation created by the Girls Leadership Program transcends cohorts— despite not knowing everyone involved, there’s still a welcome space to talk with one another because of the established groundwork the program allows. Ruby wisely noted how “we all carry unique things with us—it’s cool to be able to bring those powers to the table and talk about them, too.”

Since 2018, the RAPF GLP has sponsored 24 girls to empower their hometowns in Montana through the mentorship program in a reciprocal act of community. “The Girls Leadership Program creates this really safe container for vulnerability, for trying new things that scare the living hell out of you,” Krystle laughs, “this program certainly helped me gain a lot of confidence in presenting, trying new things, having ownership of my values and my ideas— and that’s been really impactful.”

For those eager to apply this year, applications will be open for the 2021-2022 year starting Friday, May 7th, and close on Sunday, August 15th. The Red Ants Pants Girls Leadership Program is open to girls who are entering their junior year of high school from anywhere in Montana.

**JADYN:** “Do it! It will create so many opportunities and open so many doors for you. You can’t even imagine, walking into this program, what it will do. It will add so much to your life. It’s not just leadership— it’s community, it’s people skills. You can never get too good at communicating. We all came in as bright-eyed juniors... speaking

collectively for the group, I think we were all a little uncomfortable being called ‘women;’ we preferred to be called girls... Throughout the year, we really embraced that. Embracing that identity helped me grow into my womanhood.”

**RUBY:** “It’s life-changing, and I don’t say that lightly at all— it just simply is life-changing.

Deb Newman came to one of our retreats... and something that really stuck with me that she spoke over us girls was ‘You are the world. You are the

future. Where you go, people will follow.’ That’s something I took with me— whether you’re a public leader, a silent leader— we are the future. And this program is doing such big things for rural communities and women in Montana. I would not be the person I am today without [this program], and I can take pride in who I am because of what this program gave me, because of what this community does for me.”

**MAIDA:** “The word ‘leadership’ can be really intimidating. [But] leadership can also give opportunities to learn

in-depth about yourself and about your values. To the girls out there in Montana, especially rural Montana, leadership can be a place to grow. It doesn’t need to be intimidating. The [RAPF GLP] fosters that ideal. There’s a pretty badass rodeo of women out there who bring it all together.”

**AMY:** “This whole program in and of itself— I felt like I was being mentored through the program as well. Having that opportunity to challenge yourself and grow as a mentor... is kind of a rare opportunity. It’s not what you expect coming in the door, but you gain so much more by just being part of the program.”

**KRYSTLE:** “It’s fun! We laugh until we cry, we stay up giggling; it’s so refreshing to be able to do that with a group of women. To just feel comfort

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in being your authentic self, which I think society encourages us to not be... we're seen as loud or aggressive as opposed to just independent, badass women who have ideas and values that are correct."

**SARAH:** "It's really fun from the objective [perspective], watching from the cliff, looking at this whole process unfold in our third year now. I'm just so darn proud of these women of all ages, the community coming together and supporting each other and continuing to form it in the years after independently. It's a really beautiful thing."



*The Red Ants Pants Foundation Girls Leadership Program is designed to inspire hope for our youth, develop pride in our rural communities, and foster strength and courage in our leadership. The Girls Leadership Program builds highly competent and confident leaders, cultivated specifically to build upon the strength of girls from rural Montana. Topics include communication, team building, self-awareness, self-care, emotional intelligence, project planning, project management, conflict resolution, and resiliency.*

*The Red Ants Pants Foundation Girls Leadership Program consists of a cohort of eight girls, eight female mentors and a team of professional facilitators. All participants attend three multi-day retreats throughout the year. Between retreats, participants develop a community leadership project and engage in a one-on-one mentoring designed to provide support, accountability, and assistance as needed.*

*The Red Ants Pants Foundation Girls Leadership Program participants must be Montana residents entering their junior year of high school, have access to transportation, and be able to attend ALL events. The only expense required by participants is travel to and from each retreat, located in central Montana. If this is a difficulty, stipends may be available for assistance.*

To learn more and apply, visit [redantspantsfoundation.org/girls-leadership](http://redantspantsfoundation.org/girls-leadership), or email [info@redantspantsfoundation.org](mailto:info@redantspantsfoundation.org).



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## GIRLS LEADERSHIP 2021-2022 PROGRAM DATES:

\*all retreats begin with dinner on Friday and conclude with lunch on Sunday\*

### APPLICATION OPEN:

May 7 – August 15, 2021

### FALL RETREAT:

Friday, October 22 – Sunday, October 24, 2021

### WINTER RETREAT:

Friday, January 28 – Sunday, January 30, 2022

### SPRING RETREAT & GRADUATION:

Friday, April 22 – Sunday, 24, 2022

### RED ANTS PANTS MUSIC FESTIVAL:

July, 2022 (optional but highly encouraged!)

