

Living Arts

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'I tell them to be who they are, whatever size they are, and that's OK. There is no standard of beauty but yours.'

MARIA WOOD, on the message she gives her students



GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/TOM HERDE

Maria Wood (center) is surrounded by young students wearing herbal face masks as part of her Fashion Focus Modeling and Finishing program.

The beauty within

A Pembroke modeling program teaches lessons that are more than skin-deep



For student such as Kayla Rapalee (left) of Halifax, facial saunas are just part of a modeling program that emphasizes self-confidence and includes lessons on manners, nutrition, fitness, public speaking, and money management.

By Don Aucoin
GLOBE STAFF

PEMBROKE - Moments before, the converted barn had been alive with chatter about math grades and soccer games and the imminent scourge of acne. But now the handful of preteen girls fell silent. They had little choice, what with their faces being buried in facial saunas. When Maria Wood told them time was up, 9-year-old Kelsea Daggett exclaimed, "You could cook a piece of meat in there!"

Next came the herbal masks, which provided the irrepressible Daggett with another opportunity for a wisecrack. "Ready for Halloween!" she chirped. The other girls giggled as Wood patiently applied cream to their faces one by one. "Don't you feel beautiful right now?" she asked 9-year-old Courtney Holmberg. "Not really," the girl replied, glancing dubiously in a mirror. "You will afterwards," Wood assured her.

If Wood achieves her mission - and it appears to be nothing less than that to the 38-year-old model and head of the Fashion Focus Modeling and Finishing program - all of the girls will indeed feel beautiful by the end of their 15 one-hour sessions with her. But Wood wants them to arrive at a new definition of beauty. Not the

MODELING PROGRAM, Page B11

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TAMMY DAGGETT, mother of Kelsea, 9, of Pembroke

For her students, she's a true role model

► **MODELING PROGRAM**
Continued from Page B5

skin-deep definition, despite her emphasis on skin care this afternoon, and emphatically not the definition dictated by the belly-baring Britneys on magazine covers and in music videos. "Younger and younger, teenage girls fall prey to the industry's influence, idolizing Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera," she said. "They say, 'I wish I weren't so short, I wish my hair wasn't curly, I wish my eyes were blue.' I tell them to be who they are, whatever size they are, and that's OK. There is no standard of beauty but yours."

Wood's goal is for her students to achieve self-confidence - which she calls "such an elusive thing for girls" - by developing "a sense of how to put themselves together." Girls confident about their appearance and demeanor, she believes, can resist the culture's fixation on "thin and pretty" and thereby avoid the pitfalls some of her fellow models succumbed to. "What happened to some of the girls I worked with, the eating disorders, it's maddening," said Wood, who has worked as a runway model since her teens. "It fired me up." Indeed, there was an urgency in her voice during the next class as she warned students against an obsession with weight. "Eat right," she told the girls, ranging in age from 10 to 12. "Eat from your four food groups. No yo-yo dieting."

Not the usual message of a modeling class, perhaps, but that's the point. Wood offers classes on fashion dos and don'ts, hair-care tips, runway modeling, and makeup techniques, but she also teaches "life skills" that don't rely on personal appearance: manners, nutrition, fitness, public speaking, resume writing, job interviews, money management, Internet etiquette, and simply getting along with other people. "If you want to be CEO of a company, you're going to need these skills," Wood said between classes.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/TOM HERDE

Maria Wood (right) applies an herbal facial mask to Courtney Holmberg, 9, as 7-year-old Emily Rossi (center) looks on during Wood's Fashion Focus Modeling and Finishing class.



A lesson in how not to sit is part of Maria Wood's curriculum for her students, who range in age from 6 to 17.

What she really wants the girls to learn, she says, are such intangibles as character, empathy, and self-discipline. Her program's name notwithstanding, Wood maintained, "I do not want to make a bunch of little model wannabes."

(Some of her students, though, say they are taking the classes because they do want to become models.) Unlike some modeling programs, hers does not weigh or measure students, and the program is not affiliated with any modeling agency.

The broader focus has struck a chord with some students. "I was really shy and stuff, and now I'm more self-confident," said 11-year-old Kati Farquharson of Duxbury. "Maria teaches us stuff that we're going to need for life, not just modeling."

Sarah Mizzoni of Pembroke, also 11, said that before taking Wood's program she was reluctant to talk in class, but now "I feel more comfortable going in front of people. That makes life a lot easier."

Jen Ross, 11, of Marshfield said, "The stuff you're learning about how to take care of yourself makes you feel better about yourself."

Wood's program also elicited praise from the girls' mothers, waiting nearby, who said it improves their odds in the uphill battle of parenting. "Her class isn't the typical 'look skinny, look good' type of class," said Tammy Daggett of Pembroke, mother of Kelsea. "She teaches everything: hygiene, patience, attitude, good manners, appropriate

behavior, how to project themselves. Everything I thought was important has been taught." Chris Hood of Plymouth, mother of 7-year-old Kylie, a student, said, "My daughter wants to be a movie star. But Maria teaches her that beauty is a whole package, not just how you look."

If Wood seems ambivalent about the fashion and modeling industry in which she's worked for so long, it could stem from her memories of the time when she didn't meet its ideals of beauty. At 12, Wood was a skinny kid who wore braces and towered over her classmates; she was well on her way to her current 5 feet 10 inches. Classmates dubbed her "Bucky Beaver" and "string bean." By the time she was 14, she had blossomed enough to find regular work as a model. But Wood hasn't forgotten what it felt like to be, in her words, "an ugly duckling."

After graduating with a degree in fashion merchandising and marketing from Johnson & Wales University,

Wood stopped modeling and managed a couple of clothing stores. Then, at 26, after the birth of her first child, she found herself drawn back to modeling. But she mainly limited herself to bridal shows in Greater Boston, having little time or patience for the round of "go-sees" and callbacks in New York that consume a model's life. "I basically said no to the industry. ... [Modeling] was a hobby for me, something I categorized as fun," she said.

In launching Fashion Focus 18 months ago at the Personal Best Salon, within walking distance of her home, Wood incorporated both aspects of her attitude: saying no to the fashion industry's excesses while accentuating the fun. She gives the students plenty of chances to practice their runway strolls, seeing it as a form of self-expression. "Stomachs in, shoulders back, chin level with the floor," she called to one group. "I don't want it to look military." One by one, they went through their paces in front of a long mirror: walk, half turn, walk, three-quarters turn. When offering beauty tips, Wood subtly incorporates broader health messages. She warned her students that smoking, drinking, drug use, and excessive sun are bad for the skin, then drew laughter by adding, theatrically, "Take care of your skin so you won't be 50 and saying, 'Oh, dear God!'"

All 53 of Wood's students, ranging in age from 6 to 17, took part in a fashion show recently that raised \$4,200 for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Following the skin-care lesson, Wood told her preteen class that the money had fulfilled a seriously ill 8-year-old boy's dream of going to Florida. Huge smiles and jubilant cries of "Awesome!" issued from the girls.

To anyone looking for proof of character and empathy, it was model behavior.