Tanashia Maddox-Miller, a junior at St. Joseph H.S., Downtown Brooklyn, prepares to apply shimmering pink polish to the fingernails of Cobble Hill Health Center resident Meisie Groves on a recent afternoon. Maddox-Miller is one of 20 students who belong to St. Joseph’s chapter of GlamourGals, an organization that connects young volunteers with elderly members of their community. For the complete story, see the centerfold, Page 14.
Margie, a Cobble Hill resident, right, was ready to go out on the town after St. Joe's students Keilla Rivas and Katherine Estevez finished painting her fingernails a vibrant shade of red.

St. Joe's Gals Glam Up Cobble Hill Ladies

By Marie Elena Giossi

Bombshells have been reborn at Cobble Hill Health Center, where young ladies from St. Joseph H.S., Downtown Brooklyn, are helping older female friends rediscover their inner and outer beauty.

Carrying cups of hot chocolate, seven members of the new GlamourGals chapter at St. Joe's and their moderator Julia Porter braved arctic temperatures on Friday, Jan. 26, as they trekked from school to the nursing facility on Henry St. just before 1 p.m.

The GlamourGals Foundation Inc. is a nonprofit organization that seeks to bridge the generational gap between teenage girls and older women through the joy of an intimate and shared experience—the application of makeup.

The Foundation was started in 1999 by 24-year-old Rachel Doyle when she was a sophomore at Commack H.S., L.I. After her grandmother's death in a Nevada nursing home, she was inspired to start an organization to do for other grandmothers what she couldn't do for her own.

Today, the small club Doyle started has gained national recognition and grown to include over 50 chapters in seven states.

“Smiles that span generations” is the GlamourGals motto because that’s what happens during an afternoon of glamour. Teenage girls spend a few hours spreading smiles by providing complimentary facials, makeovers, and manicures to women in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and senior centers.

At First, Intimidation

Junior Corinne Rivera said she joined GlamourGals because “it's something different. We actually get to go out of school and help people. It was kind of scary at first. The people are nice but I was intimidated to go up to them.”

Once she started approaching the older women, however, she immediately warmed up to them and they to her. “They were so nice. They were glad we were there and they invited us back,” she said. The experience, she added, made her miss her own grandparents in Puerto Rico.

Girls bubbled with energy as they reached the final turn before entering the health center, a skilled nursing facility offering residential and day programs for hundreds of elderly and disabled adults.

“Keleisha Sutherland asked me to advise the group. She heard about it through 4H. Now she's one of the co-presidents,” said Porter, an English teacher at St. Joe's. She admitted that she didn’t think teenage girls would necessarily be interested in a club like this but they’ve proved her wrong. Thirty students signed up originally and the chapter currently has 20 members, mostly sophomores and juniors with a couple of seniors and one freshman, Shiovahn Gustave, chapter vice president.

The group formed late last fall and this was only their second GlamourGals visit at Cobble Hill, where they plan to hold sessions once every month.

Co-presidents Karolyn Tyson and Keleisha Sutherland, both sophomores, are scheduled to attend a leadership convention and training session in Manhattan on Feb. 3. Since the club is still in its formative stages, the girls have only been trained to give hand massages and manicures. Porter plans to have more training sessions in the coming months so girls will feel comfortable and confident providing beauty treatments for the face.

The chapter will receive continued support from the GlamourGals Foundation, which has a newsletter, events and supplies all makeup products to participating schools.

Irina Zapol skaia, assistant director of therapeutic recreation, greeted the girls at Cobble Hill and ushered them to a group of residents, mostly women, in the activities room.

“These girls are here to make you more beautiful than you are, if that is even possible,” she announced.

Shade of Pink, Please

When residents were asked if they wanted manicures, they were hesitant at first and concerned about what it would cost. With an assurance that this service was free and some gentle cajoling, the ladies grew excited and began selecting which shade of red or pink polish they wanted on their nails.

Older women and young volunteers immediately connected, perhaps seeing a little bit of their past or future in each others’ eyes. As the afternoon progressed, each discovered the other’s inner beauty.

While the older women may have felt depressed or despondent before, they were rejuvenated in the company of their youthful girlfriends. They’re eager to chat and share life stories as well as timeless beauty tips while feeling a renewed sense of confidence and dignity themselves.

As young women held the hands of the older women, the level of affection, admiration and respect they have for their elder counterparts is obvious.

“Women, no matter how old we are, we like to take care of ourselves, our faces and our nails, and that doesn’t change with age. Having nice, pretty, friendly girls do this for them is like icing on the cake. Everyone is very happy to see them,” said Zapol skaia. She noted that the residents, both female and male, enjoy seeing the youthful faces and respond to the hand massages because the “gentle touch is therapeutic.”

Phyllis, an older woman in a yellow turban didn’t want any primping but she delighted in the company of juniors Delilah Woods and Tatianna D’Auvergne. “I really like her,” Woods said. “She reminds me of my grandmother.”