



## Perseverance

# An Idealist Reinvents Herself



Over the past year, **Carla Stokes**, MPH '99, PhD '04, has flown to cities around the United States to spread her message of positive self-esteem to girls and women through educational workshops, keynote speeches, and life-coaching. Stokes says for the first time since completing a postdoctoral research fellowship at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2006, she is finally making enough money to feel financially secure. And the key to her new-found success?

"I had to reinvent myself," she explains. "I'm still an idealist. But I also had to learn how to be a businesswoman."

Over the past 13 years, Stokes has empowered thousands of teen girls to transcend the harmful social messages that can hold them back from enjoying good health and success. Stokes began this work while still a U-M student, after founding an Atlanta, Georgia-based nonprofit called Helping Our Teen Girls in Real Life Situations, Inc. (HOTGIRLS).

But HOTGIRLS lost many grants and donors during the Great Recession of 2008, and both Stokes's work and motivation began to falter.

"My mom says when I was two, my daycare provider joked that my name should have been 'Determination,'" says Stokes. "And maybe that quality kept me going when things got tough."

With help from mentors and successful entrepreneurs, Stokes has now set up a coaching and consulting business at [drcarla.com](http://drcarla.com) that she hopes will reach even more girls and women, as well as educators, parents, and professionals who work with girls. And she is expanding her reach by helping both women and public health professionals develop business skills so they can become social entrepreneurs, too.

Because of her doctoral research on the online communications of African-American

teens, Stokes gained worldwide recognition. "I was one of the first to examine social media in a public health context," she says, noting that her thesis shed light on "how young women navigate their sexuality in the digital age."

While enrolled as a doctoral student in health behavior and health education in 2001, Stokes founded HOTGIRLS, a peer-to-peer nonprofit that gives girls and young women leadership roles in planning and public speaking and helps them take their messages about health education, media literacy, and positive self-esteem into schools. Over the years, many HOTGIRLS have gone on to become doctors or have entered the fields of social work or public health, ready to pass on the HOTGIRLS message of self-love to the next generation of adolescent women.

**"My mom says when I was two, my daycare provider joked that my name should have been 'Determination.'"**

Now, as her travel schedule again fills up, and both financial and personal success come tantalizingly within reach, Stokes says she will still fit in workshops with underserved girls whenever she can.

"Maybe I'm stubborn, but I have no regrets," she says. "I gave up opportunities for jobs, including prestigious jobs in academia. But I know this is the lifestyle I want, because entrepreneurship allows me a lot of freedom and creativity. In this society, all girls face challenges—including health-related pressures—and that's why I am dedicated to serving them." —by *Madeline Strong Diehl* <

*risk for developing cardiovascular disease and cancer in the future."*

*"I want to change the tide of chronic disease."*