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Girls DECODE secret messages

"The lemon juice works best!"

"Why do you think that is?" queries Jayla, a teacher at Assemble in Garfield.

Viola, a slender, brown-haired girl, pauses. "Because it has more acid?" she asks hesitantly.

"Right!"

Viola and Lucy, who are ten, and Leia, who is twelve, are learning how to write secret messages using invisible ink at Girls Maker Night, one of Assemble's afterschool programs.

What is ASSEMBLE?

Assemble is a nonprofit organization that fosters learning and creativity by providing hands-on, educational programs focused on STEAM principles for boys and girls, families, and the community. In addition to Girls Maker Night, Assemble offers other activities for children in grades K - 8, like Assemble Afterschool, Day Camp, and Saturday Crafternoons. With the exception of the summer camps for which scholarships are available, all programs are free, thanks to generous support from BNY Mellon, Women of South Western PA, Inc., and the Grable, Jack Buncher, Fine, McSwigan, Robert J. Coury and GE foundations.

"We also have a high school program called Hack the Future," says director and founder, Nina Barbuto. "And on Sundays, we do birthday parties!" she adds, pointing to colorful birthday decorations hanging from the ceiling.

The SECRETS behind SECRET MESSAGES

When I arrive at Assemble's storefront venue, I see three long tables covered with brown paper set up to form a U-shape in the middle of the room. Teachers Jayla, Shannon and CMU volunteer, Christina, are pouring four mysterious liquids into clear plastic cups on the tables and setting out various writing tools, like sharpened Pop-sicle sticks, white crayons and Q-tips.

As the girls gather at the tables, the teachers pass out slips of paper and instruct them to write a message using an invisible ink pen with a UV light on the end.

"Write something nice or positive," Jayla tells them. "You can keep it anonymous."

After scribbling down a few invisible words, the teachers collect the slips and randomly pass them out again so the girls can illuminate the message using the UV light on the end of their pen. Everyone reads a message aloud.

You're amazing.

I like telling people my feelings.

I love cake.

"That was mine," admits eleven-year-old Sarah, who had arrived on her bicycle a few minutes earlier.

Jayla draws the kids' attention to the liquids in the plastic cups. "The white, clear and yellow liquids are all edible, but not the blue," she cautions.

After sniffing and tasting the edible contents in the cups, the girls quickly figure



Jayla GIVES instructions

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out that milk, vinegar and lemon juice are the three edible “inks.” The blue one is harder to identify. Sarah suggests it might be chlorine.

“No, but you wash with it,” Jayla hints.

“Soap!” the girls exclaim.

For the rest of the class, the girls write on card stock using various “inks” and experiment with three different methods to reveal the messages. In addition to the UV lights, the girls discover that a thin wash of paint decodes messages written with white crayons and pencils. Jayla holds up a heat gun, which looks like a heavy duty hair dryer and shows them how to clip the cards to a cardboard “frame” so fingers and hands don’t get near the tip.

“It gets very hot,” she warns.

Apprehension shows on the girls’ faces as they watch Jayla’s demonstration.



Viola **READS** her message

“The heat gun will be used with adult supervision,” Shannon reassures them.

As UV light pens flash, the gun hums and the girls write invisible words with Q-tips, someone turns off the lights, which make the messages easier to view.

“I see it! It’s coming out!” Viola says excitedly, as Jayla safely points the heat gun a few inches from her white card.

Amidst the bustling, I notice that Lucy has drawn columns on her card paper in order to keep track of the ink paper and decoding methods she uses. She works slowly and methodically. Her scientific methodology impresses me.

“I like your organization,” I tell her. “You’re doing a real science experiment.”

That’s a message worth decoding. ■

Pittsburgh writer, Ann K. Howley, is the author of the award-winning and recently re-released memoir, Confessions of a Doo-Gooder Gone Bad.

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