

Cindy Whitehead's GN4LW Skateboard Conversation Kit



Girl Is Not a 4 Letter Word skateboard created by Cindy Whitehead. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

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HER STORY

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Cindy Whitehead



“Take every
dare that
comes your
way.”

– Cindy Whitehead

Skate card for Marina Del Ray Skate Park used by Cindy Whitehead. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

A skateboarding pioneer, Cindy Whitehead turned pro at 17, skating both pool and half-pipe and becoming one of the top-ranked vert skaters while competing against the boys—something girls were not doing in the mid-1970s. But Whitehead had no choice but to wear boys' shorts when competing; there were no skate products for girls in the 1970s.

She changed that in 2013 with her girl-empowered brand Girl is NOT a 4 Letter Word (GN4LW). Whitehead is especially supportive of young female skaters through the GN4LW skate team and products geared towards women and girls.

Whitehead's signature phrase printed in gold on many of the GN4LW products personifies her independent spirit, "Live life balls to the wall. Do epic sh*t. Take every dare that comes your way. You can sleep when you're dead."

Driving Questions

How have women used innovative ways to access and change the culture of sports?

Why does gender equality in sports matter?

Supporting Questions

- What barriers did Cindy Whitehead face as a young professional female skateboarder?
- How can a lack of sports equipment for women be a barrier to participation?
- What does the phrase “Girl is not a four-letter word” mean? What have been some of the negative connotations that have been associated with the word “girl”?
- In what ways have female skaters experienced different treatment than male skaters?
- How did Cindy Whitehead's actions change the way women and girls are able to participate in skateboarding?
- What are examples of barriers to gender equality in sports today? What are examples of ways that people are taking action to address these issues?
- Has the way people think about gender equality changed since Cindy Whitehead turned pro in the 1970s?
- What impact could working towards gender equality in sports have on other parts of our society?

Civic Learning Themes

- Activism
- Equity
- Community Participation

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards

D2.Civ.10.6-8. Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.

D2.Civ.10.9-12. Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.

D2.Civ.14.6-8. Compare historical and contemporary means of changing societies and promoting the common good.

D2.Civ.14.9-12. Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.5.6-8. Explain how and why perspectives of people have changed over time.

D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.8 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Primary & Secondary Sources

All conversation kit resources can be found in this [Learning Lab collection](#).

Individual links to resources are also included below for your convenience.

- Artifacts:
 - [Girl Is Not a 4 Letter Word skateboard created by Cindy Whitehead](#)
 - [Skate card for Skateboard World used by Cindy Whitehead](#)
 - [Skate shoes worn by Cindy Whitehead](#)

- Podcast: [Robin Logan and Cindy Whitehead, Pioneering Skateboarders, September 25, 2013, from the Lemelson Center at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History](#)
- Articles:

Excerpts of each article are included at the end of this conversation kit. Links to the articles in their entirety from the original sources are below.

- [Alvarez, Anya. "Interview with Skateboarding Legend Cindy Whitehead." TeenVogue.com, Teen Vogue, March 3, 2017.](#)
- [Calderón, Trina. "Female Skateboarders Still Striving for Even Footing with Male Peers." Vice.com, April 5, 2017.](#)

Facilitation Strategies & Discussion Formats

Throughout her career as a skateboarder and mentor, Cindy Whitehead has worked to increase the number of girls in action sports and change the culture to be more welcoming for and supportive of female skaters. Through discussion and critical thinking prompts, the following teaching strategies ask students to analyze barriers to equal participation of girls in skateboarding and to assess the actions Cindy Whitehead took to address these issues.

Object Analysis

Provide students with an image of Cindy Whitehead's skateboard and questions included in the Object Analysis sheet provided at the end of this document. Individually or in pairs, have students examine the image and respond to the prompts below.

- What are your first impressions of this object?
- Circle three things that you think are interesting or unusual about this object.
- How do you think this object is used? When do you think it was made?

- Who do you think would use this object? Where might they use it?
- What adjectives would you use to describe this object?
- What does the phrase on the object say? What do you think this might mean? Why might it be printed on the object?
- Who do you think made this object? What could have been their reason for making it?
- What else do you notice?

Display an image of the skateboard for the full class to see ([hi-res image](#)). As students share their responses to the object analysis questions make note of their response on the image or in a separate chart on the board.

Historical Context

Have students look closely at Cindy Whitehead's membership card from Skateboard World ([hi-res image](#)). As they study the card, individually or in small groups, ask students to identify:

- Who did this card belong to? How would you describe this person?
- What organization issued the card? What do you think was Cindy Whitehead's role in this organization?
- This card was issued in 1977. What else was happening at this time?
- The date listed on the card is for Cindy Whitehead's birth date, making her a teenager when she received this card. What do you notice that is similar or different to the interests and activities or teenagers today?

Share brief background information about Cindy Whitehead provided below:

A skateboarding pioneer and one of the first female professional skateboarders, Cindy Whitehead turned pro at seventeen, skating both pool and half-pipe and becoming one of the top-ranked vert skaters while competing against the boys—something girls were not doing in the mid-1970s. She changed that in 2013 with her girl-empowered brand Girl is NOT a 4 Letter Word (GN4LW). Whitehead is especially supportive of young female skaters through the GN4LW skate team and products which are geared towards women and girls.

Barriers and Innovations

Divide students into groups of three to investigate the barriers Cindy Whitehead saw facing female skateboarders and how she acted to address those inequities. Using a jigsaw discussion format, have each group of students examine one of the following topics. Then move students into mixed groups to share their new knowledge and learn from their peers' findings.

Direct links to resources associated with the discussion questions are incorporated into the material below. All resources can also be found in one place at the [Learning Lab](#).

- Equipment:

(Podcast [13:01 – 15:33]) [Robin Logan and Cindy Whitehead, Pioneering Skateboarders, September 25, 2013, from the Lemelson Center at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History](#)

(Quote) "Whitehead had no choice but to wear boys' shorts when competing; there were no skate products for girls in the 1970s." *Smithsonian American Women*, Smithsonian Books, 2019

(Image) [Hi-res image of the men's puma shoes worn by Cindy Whitehead](#)

- How can a lack of sports equipment for women be a barrier to participation?
 - What specific actions did Cindy Whitehead take to address the issue of lack of equipment for female skaters?
 - How did Cindy Whitehead's actions change the way women and girls are able to participate in skateboarding?
- Gender Stereotypes:

(Article) ["Interview with Skateboarding Legend Cindy Whitehead,"](#) March 3, 2017, from TeenVogue.com. An excerpt is included at the end of this conversation kit.

 - What does the phrase "Girl is NOT a 4 Letter Word" mean? What have been some of the negative connotations that have been associated with the word "girl"?

- What specific actions did Cindy Whitehead take to address the problem of negative stereotypes of female skaters?
- How did Cindy Whitehead's actions change the way women and girls are able to participate in skateboarding?
- Equal Opportunity:

(Article) [“Female Skateboarders Still Striving For Even Footing With Male Peers,”](#)

April 5, 2017, from Vice.com An excerpt is included at the end of this conversation kit.

- In what ways have female skaters experienced different treatment than male skaters?
- What specific actions did Cindy Whitehead take to address the issue of unequal pay and fewer opportunities for professional female skaters?
- How did Cindy Whitehead's actions change the way women and girls are able to participate in skateboarding?

Connections to Today

Convene students in a full class conversation, structured as a Socratic Seminar, Socratic Circle, Fishbowl Discussion or another similar format. Facilitate a discussion that makes connections to issues of gender equality in sports, and in society at large, using the following prompts.

- What are examples of barriers to gender equality in sports today? What are examples of ways that people are acting to address these issues?
- Why does gender equality in sports matter? Has the way people thought about gender equality changed since Cindy Whitehead turned pro in the 1970s?
- What impact could working towards gender equality in sports have on other parts of our society?

Reflection Prompt

Have students individually read Cindy Whitehead's signature quote and respond to the reflection questions.

- “Live life balls to the wall. Do epic sh*t. Take every dare that comes your way. You can sleep when you’re dead.” – Cindy Whitehead

What does this quote mean to you? What issues are you passionate about?

Supplemental Resources

- Video: Whitehead, Cindy. “Girl is NOT a 4 Letter Word.” TEDxYouth@SantaMonica, March 30, 2014.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9WgHYqJc5U>
- Articles:
 - [Roenigk, Alyssa. “Skateboard pioneer Cindy Whitehead paves the way for the next generation of girl skaters.” ESPN.com, ESPN, March 7, 2017.](#)
 - [Robertson, Les. “New GN4LW Board with Empowering Message for Girls.” SKATE\[SLATE\].com, April 25, 2016.](#)

This conversation kit was authored by Abby Pfisterer at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Learn more at <https://womenshistory.si.edu/> and <https://americanhistory.si.edu/>.

Supplementary Materials: Object Analysis

- What are your first impressions of this object?
- Circle three things that you think are interesting or unusual about this object.
- How do you think this object is used?
- Who do you think would use this object? Where might they use it?
- What adjectives would you use to describe this object?
- What does the phrase on the object say? What do you think this might mean? Why might it be printed on the object?
- Who do you think made this object? What could have been their reason for making it?
- What else do you notice?



Girl Is Not a 4 Letter Word skateboard created by Cindy Whitehead. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Supplementary Materials: Article 1 Excerpt (Teen Vogue)

Interview with Skateboarding Legend Cindy Whitehead

Find out all about her newest endeavor, *It's Not About Pretty: A Book About Radical Skater Girls*.

By Anya Alvarez

March 3, 2017

Cindy Whitehead is a skateboarding legend. In 1978, at the age of 17, she turned pro, becoming a top-ranked female skater for pool riding and half-pipe in the United States. She also is the only female to have a two-page feature and centerfold in a skateboarding magazine.

When she retired at 22, she became a sports stylist, working on styling athletes and sports campaigns, and has worked on Nike, Adidas, and Gatorade campaigns, as well as styling professional athletes like Kobe Bryant and Tiger Woods.

Then, in 2013, Cindy merged her passion for style with skateboarding, and created the brand Girl is NOT a 4 Letter Word in collaboration with professional skateboarding company Dwindle Inc., and designed a skateboard aimed toward the female market. With her collaboration with Dwindle, GN4LW donates a portion of proceeds to go toward nonprofits that help young women whose dream is to make a living in action sports. This led to Cindy being honored by the Smithsonian Museum for her contributions as a woman in the world of skateboarding.

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Teen Vogue: What is the meaning of Girl is NOT a 4 Letter Word? Are you trying to break the stereotype that “playing like a girl” is a bad thing?

Cindy Whitehead: Exactly. The easiest way that I explain it to young girls, is that nasty words you’re not supposed to say usually come in four letters. And one should never say, “You throw like a girl” or “skate like a girl,” because in that context it’s usually used as a put-down. Too often people use “girl” as a negative.

TV: Do the young girls and women you have contact with resonate with your mission?

CW: They do. A lot of girls already get it before I explain it to them. Most of them know exactly what it means, and it's unfortunate that they do. I would like to get in a day and age where people don't look at girls as inferior. The ones I get the most questions and comments from are men and boys. It doesn't make sense to them because many of them still use it as a slur, not understanding how degrading it is to girls.

TV: Have girls told you personal experiences about them being called a girl in a negative context?

CW: Unfortunately, yes. It still goes on so much, that young women get the impression that when they go skateboarding, they don't belong. Skateboarding is becoming more accepted for girls, but there are still instances where the girls will get hassled, but once they prove themselves, the boys tend to shut up. However, you need to be able to be a beginner and not have to prove yourself in order to be respected.

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TV: What was the inspiration behind the book *It's Not About Pretty: A Book About Radical Skater Girls*?

CW: There was a need for it, because no one has focused solely on women in skateboarding. Women have been included here and there in a page or two in men's skateboarding books. My book features girls from the age of 5 to women who are 54, who skate in all different disciplines: downhill, pool, parks, street, soul skating. Basically everything.

My husband, Ian, is an advertising photographer and he took every single photo in the book. These are photos that have been documented over the last six years from events we attended. He started shooting girls at competitions so we could put them up on our website, www.girlisnota4letterword.com, so that the girls would have photos and have a platform when they were at these contests because all the media coverage was being given to the guys' competition.

One day it came to us that we had all these photos, many that hadn't seen the light of day, and we thought that we should do something with them.

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TV: With this book, what is the main thing you hope to accomplish?

CW: I believe it's important for the girls in this book to be out there and be seen. We also want girls to see the diversity that's in skateboarding, and so that they can feel encouraged to try it for themselves. Every time you see a picture of a girl skateboarding, you are encouraging another girl who says, "If she can do that, I can do that."

I think that's the most important thing: encouraging the next generation.

Complete article: ["Interview with Skateboarding Legend Cindy Whitehead."](#)

Supplementary Materials: Article 2 Excerpt (Vice)

Female Skateboarders Still Striving for Even Footing with Male Peers

The number of female skateboarders has grown in recent years. But pro female skaters still see inequalities in pay and sponsorship opportunities in comparison to their male counterparts.

By Trina Calderón

April 5, 2017

In the 1970s, Hermosa Beach local Cindy Whitehead was one of the best professional American female vert skateboarders for pool riding and half-pipe. Sponsored by Simms, she was the first female skater to have her own two-page article and centerfold in a [skateboarding magazine](#). She went on to become a Skateboarding Hall of Fame inductee and sought-after fashion stylist who specializes in sports. Whitehead was a prominent skater at a time when female skaters were considered afterthoughts.

Today, despite being in the periphery of the industry for decades, female skaters have grown in numbers—notice the girls now riding in local skateparks. Women skaters are competing in the 2020 Olympics. Australian teen and skating pro Poppy Starr Olsen gave her own TEDx talk in 2014. In Jordyn Barrett, Powell has a female pro skater on its team for the first time in a long time. Lizzie Armanto is on the cover of April's *Thrasher* magazine with her own centerfold, and she has parts in new *Birdhouse* and *Thrasher* videos.

It has taken a push, but things are happening. Organizations, and advocates like Whitehead, have worked hard to help female skaters gain the visibility, support, and money they need to progress, compete, and "do epic [s***]," a philosophy Whitehead lives by.

Whitehead says her company, Girl is NOT a 4 Letter Word (GN4LW) is "a movement and a brand."

"It's a movement because we stand behind any and all female skaters, not just the one we have on our team," she said. "We support everyone. We have girls that call us and say, 'Hey, I need advice. I got this job doing a commercial and they want to pay me

this, do you think that's fair?' I'm not an agent, but I work in that end of the industry. I can make a phone call for you and find out."



Cindy Whitehead started GN4LW to help promote and inspire female skateboarders. Photos © Ian Logan

GN4LW works to elevate female pro skateboarding on their website, at skate competitions, and in the retail market. The company collaborates with Dwindle Distribution and Dusters California on seven skateboards designed and marketed for females. The boards are sold in big stores like Zumiez, giving girls front-row exposure and access.

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Female skaters have long fought for gender equality in everything from contest availability and sponsorship opportunities to prize money and travel allowances. While freestyle legend Patti McGee was on [the cover of LIFE](#) in 1965, women historically have always had to speak up for themselves. [Cara-Beth Burnside's Thrasher cover](#) in 1989 foreshadowed the push from her generation. But in 2002, Burnside, Jen O'Brien, and Mimi Knoop still had to [visit ESPN](#) to tell X Games executives how they felt about the absence of women in the biggest televised skateboarding competition in the world. As a result of the visit, Americans were finally able to watch pro women skate on TV in the

women's vert demonstration at the 2002 X Games in Philadelphia. In 2006, Burnside threatened not to compete at the X Games unless women received equal prize money to the men. [ESPN relented](#).

Nevertheless, men still dominate magazine covers, videos, and mainstream media, fueling the perception that men still rule the industry and making brands less likely to give women a shot. That perception trickles down to affect all female skaters, regardless of age.

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GN4LW works with Dwindle, the biggest skateboarding company out there. But Whitehead thinks the industry as a whole is missing out on a golden opportunity. "We're not valuing the female pros as much as men and the funny thing is these girls on the average are getting more mainstream coverage than the guys are," she said. "The guys are getting it within the skate world, but the girls are getting it in the mainstream world, and doesn't that hit an even bigger audience and encourage even more people to skate who then go in and buy those boards?"

...

Getting sponsored isn't easy if you don't get exposure. The more coverage you get, the more you're worth. The DIY nature of skating can be seen in the way women have used social media, Instagram specifically, to promote themselves when brands have been reluctant to do so. And beyond promotion, social media may be giving women skaters a voice. Try [#skatergirl](#).

The market is there. It used to be skate with the boys or don't skate at all, but not anymore. "I had someone in male-dominated skateboarding tell me the other day, there's just not enough girls to have those contests in [foreign countries], and I was like, 'really?'" Whitehead said. "I'm going to tell you 10 girls that live in that country right now that are on my Instagram that I watch daily, and one of them is sponsored by Nike Russia, so don't tell me that's there's not 10 girls in Russia 'cause there are and I can name them. I have photos and video of them.' They're looking at me like I'm insane and I'm like, that's the power of the Internet, that's why we love it."

...

When Whitehead turned pro there were hardly any female role models. Things have changed. "I looked in the magazine and I saw a picture of girls mainly doing freestyle and bank wall stuff and I was like, 'oh that's cool,'" she said. "There [are] other girls out there. I wonder if I'll meet them." She befriended pro skater Judy Oyama from Santa Cruz and they helped push each other and learn new tricks.

Now Whitehead hopes her book helps push other girls to get on a board and compete. "If we could have the mainstream world look at this book and go, 'Wow, we had no idea that all these girls were doing these amazing things,' maybe somebody at Pepsi, Coke, Tide, or Dove sees that and goes 'Why aren't we tapping into this? Why aren't we coming to these girls and supporting them?'" she said. "It would look great for us, and great for them.' Maybe that helps, maybe when they see 144 pages full of beautiful rad girls skateboarding, they'll start thinking."

Complete article: [**"Female Skateboarders Still Striving for Even Footing with Male Peers."**](#)