Polished Pebbles
Founded: August 2009
Founder: Kelly Fair
Community Focus Areas: Woodlawn, Douglas, Grand Boulevard, Oakland and Bronzeville

Polished Pebbles founder Kelly Fair likes to illustrate the impact of the Polished Pebbles mentoring model by telling the story of one of her young mentees introducing fellow South Sider First Lady Michelle Obama, who said, “Well, there you go. That’s what the South Side of Chicago produces.” According to Fair, “This was a proud moment for our organization because it showed our girls that world-class communication skills and rubbing shoulders with global leaders are within their reach.”

To date, 1,000 girls, aged seven to 17, have gone through Polished Pebbles’ school and community-based training in Woodlawn, Oakland, Bronzeville, Washington Park, and Roseland. The organization partners with local schools, businesses, college and graduate school interns, and more than 400 volunteers and mentors to teach the girls to communicate effectively with their peers and adults, be poised and respectful, and seek out leadership opportunities. Polished Pebbles does extensive work through the Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Housing Authority, and UChicago Charter Schools. Fair also makes her blog, kellyfairthementor, available to girls and families who want to share their experiences and lessons learned through the program.

In August 2014, Fair was honored by Ariel Investments as one of Chicago’s “40 Game Changers Under 40.” Because her of activities to promote Polished Pebbles, in October, Fair was selected to be a U.S. delegate and presenter at the Opportunity Collaboration Conference, a convening of social change thought leaders from around the world, in Ixtapa, Mexico. She shared mentoring best practices and built awareness for her model as a solution for empowering under-resourced communities.

Fair applied to the Community Programs Accelerator at the University of Chicago to support Polished Pebbles’ expansion to more sites around the city, particularly on the South and West sides, increasing and diversifying revenue, and bringing the program to college campuses to mentor African American women. Fair’s other goals include maintaining longer-term relationships with the girls and making better use of data to demonstrate impact.

She said, “With the world class resources and leadership soon to be available to us via this partnership with the University of Chicago, we seek to enhance our program development, strategic planning, and long-term sustainability.”