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Lessons in Credit, on a Micro Level

By [WILLIAM ALDEN](#)

Stephanie Tupper spends her days in [Citigroup](#)'s corporate treasury, monitoring the liquidity of the giant bank. But Thursday evening, her task was decidedly more micro.

“Predatory lending: Have you guys heard of that term before?” Ms. Tupper asked a room full of high school seniors at Sunnyside Community Services in Queens, during a session organized by a group that aims to promote financial literacy among teenagers.

The group, the High Water Women Foundation, which was founded in 2005 by senior women in the hedge fund industry, holds such classes in community centers and libraries around the city, using curriculum created by the Wall Street veteran Muriel F. Siebert. For the volunteers, many of whom work in finance or law, the classes are a way to channel their professional skills in a more altruistic pursuit.

“In finance, let’s face it, often the only thing you’re building is capital,” said Diane Keating, the executive director of High Water Women. The volunteer program, she said, offers “tangible results.”

Thursday’s session focused on credit, with three volunteers explaining the mechanics of debit cards, credit cards, prepaid cards and loans. The group of more than a dozen students, snacking on crackers, cheese slices and Capri Sun, completed written exercises and talked about how credit had played a role in their lives.

“To me, credit means professional opportunity,” said Charity Clark, an associate at the law firm Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe. “I used credit to get [student loans](#) to go to law school, and now I’m a lawyer.”

High Water Women focuses on lower-income communities where young people might end up learning these lessons the hard way, rather than in a classroom.

Ms. Siebert’s curriculum, which she developed in association with the city’s Department of Education, was adopted by High Water Women in 2009. Ms. Keating estimates that about 1,000 students went through the program this year.

Ms. Siebert, the founder of the [Siebert Financial Corporation](#), said she became concerned about financial literacy during her five years as New York State’s superintendent of banking, beginning in 1977.

“I realized none of these youngsters had one course in managing money,” she said in an interview.

The lesson on Thursday emphasized the practical.

“You should never, ever, ever, ever have more than three credit cards,” said Ambreen Hussain, the third teaching volunteer, who works as a product manager at Sony Music Entertainment.

When Ms. Tupper, of Citigroup, was asked by a student which bank was “the best,” her answer was diplomatic.

“You always have to do your own research,” she said. “No one bank is any better than the others.”