

Run to a healthier lifestyle

Program empowers girls through exercise, activities

BY MALINDA REINKE

For The Dominion Post

There's a pretty good chance that, despite 10 weeks of training, none of the runners from Brookhaven Elementary School will take a top spot in the annual 5K Back Bay Snowflake Sprint on Dec. 2.

But that won't change the fact that they'll all win the race.

As members of Monongalia County's first council of Girls on the Run International, they've won already.

"It's not just about running," says Maggie DiFazio, 9, a fourth-grader at Brookhaven and one of the school's 18 Girls on the Run. "It's about other things, like being healthy."

And being a good teammate.

And being a good citizen.

Girls on the Run, founded in 1996 by four-time Hawaii Ironman triathlete Molly Barker, teaches third- through fifth-grade girls about self-respect, healthy minds and fit bodies by training them to compete in a 5-kilometer run.

But Laurie Abildso, founder of the local council and co-head coach along with Meghan Durst, says there's so much more to the program than that.

"Running is actually just a small part of it," Abildso said. "It's not about making these girls into fast runners. It's about getting them to explore their values, to learn to work together as a team and how to contribute to their community."

Each session is led by trained female coaches who guide and mentor girls through the fun and inspirational curriculum.

Abildso said the goal is to empower the girls with a sense of achievement, a foundation for team building and a commitment to enhance the places they live.

The girls meet after school twice a week for 10 weeks. Topics discussed at the sessions include body image and the media, resisting peer-pressure and making healthy decisions. The running is sprinkled in.

"They might run a lap and then do some sort of activity," Abildso said. "They may run while they think about something we talked about."

They may run while they plan a project to help the community.

Catherine Whitworth, Maggie's mother, says her daughter saw a flier about Girls on the Run at school, but it was talking with the coaches and hearing about the curriculum that convinced her to join up.

"At first she was scared she wouldn't be able to run a 5K," Whitworth says. "But the coaches really help the kids to push to their limit without being negative. It's about focusing on doing your best, or doing better than you did last week — not about doing better than the person running next to you."

"It's the kind of program that meets the girls where they are. Even if a girl couldn't run a single lap, she'd still be welcome."



Girls on the Run is taking off at a time when childhood obesity is a growing problem.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows the prevalence of overweight 6- to 11-year-olds increased from 6.5 percent in the late 1970s to nearly 19 percent in 2003-'04.

There are other concerns for girls: depression, eating disorders, suicide and adolescent pregnancy.

Surveys of nearly 300 girls involved in Girls on the Run in 2006 show that between the beginning of the season and the end, they experienced significant improvements in self-esteem and body-size satisfaction, according to research by Rita DiGiacchino DeBate, an associate public health professor at the University of South Florida.

There were smaller gains in attitudes toward health behaviors, physical activity and empowerment.

Girls on the Run has chapters in more than 150 cities and the program will host more than 70 end-of-the-season 5K runs in the United States and Canada this year.

The Monongalia Council at Brookhaven — one of only two councils in West Virginia — is run through a partnership with Monongalia General Hospital and the support of individual and corporate donors, including Petroplus & Associates, Centra Bank, HealthWorks Rehab and Fitness, MedExpress and Dynamic Physical Therapy.

Abildso, who volunteers her service to Girls on the Run, works as a health educator with WVU.

She says she heard about Girls on the Run a few years ago when she was at school at the University of Delaware and held onto her goal to help spread the word.

She says she hopes even more schools and more girls in Monongalia will have the chance to participate in the program in future seasons.

Co-coach Durst heard about the program last year and was eager to be a part of it, too.

"Just the possibility of reaching even one girl and helping her view herself in a more positive light makes Girls on the Run such an appealing program," Durst said. "And of course, I love running and wanted to help girls discover that joy I



Jason DeProspero/The Dominion Post photos

Taylor Lyons (above, left) runs past Lakin Davis while circling the track at Brookhaven Elementary. Runners (left) make their way past the school while jogging laps around the track.



feel when I run."

Whitworth is glad her daughter Maggie is part of the movement. As a mother, she has become a fan of the program for all the reasons listed above.

"I think anything that gets a child out moving around in good weather is a good thing," she said. "It's hard to grow up and be a pre-adolescent. And I don't know the lasting changes one

program will make. But you never know. Just a passing encounter with someone who saw the best in you can make all the difference.

"Maybe one of these coaches will be that someone."

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ASSOCIATED PRESS writer Erin Jordan contributed to this article.