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Girls On The Run

Training Program Gets Students Ready For A Race - And More

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Jennifer Scott For the State Journal

"It's just a seed planted now. The confidence, the self-esteem, the healthy body image - all of that will grow to influence her later on so much more."

As Anne Giroux speaks, her daughter Lily laughs with her teammates across the field at Shorewood School. The group of third, fourth and fifth-grade girls are part of Dane County's new Girls on the Run program. The girls meet for two hour-long sessions each week for 12 weeks. While the sessions combine training for the girls' first 5-kilometer run, the June 4 Komen Madison Race for the Cure, "It's not just laps," Giroux emphasizes.

And indeed, Girls on the Run is not just running. Founded by four-time Hawaii Ironman triathlete Molly Wilmer Barker in 1996, Girls on the Run combines fun physical activities with thought-provoking discussion; it essentially infuses uplifting workouts with self-esteem enhancement. Abby Weinkauf, one of Lily's coaches, says that the most significant change she has seen during the program is the marked increase in the girls' confidence.

"I think that now many of them have the tools to confront situations in a healthier manner. They know the right words to say, and they have the decision-making skills to deal with what may come their way," says Weinkauf, a runner herself who volunteers her time to Girls on the Run. "They're excited for the workout, too. It's all building up to something, but it's in a very fun setting."

Ellie Ploch, a Thoreau student coached by Weinkauf, is pumped up about the Girls on the Run program as a whole and the upcoming Race for the Cure. But more importantly, she's equipped with the self-esteem, self-respect, and other tools to enable her to be successful in life. Ellie says, "I didn't know what it was going to be like at first. But when I come to Girls on the Run, I have so much fun."

And Girls on the Run is catching on. Since Barker founded the program in Charlotte, N.C., it has spread throughout the United States and Canada. Girls on the Run International now has become a staple in about 100 communities, and the organization's 17 end-of-the-year races, jointly sponsored by the New Balance athletic shoe manufacturer, attracted more than 11,000 participants and supporters alike last year.

This fall, Girls on the Run will be offered in three locations

throughout Dane County. In addition to the Shorewood School site, there will be a biweekly session at Thoreau. Stoughton, too, is piloting a once a week program, modified from the original curriculum.

Susanne Treiber, council director for Girls on the Run of Dane County, says, "We're trying to use the incredible resources available in our community. ...We want to partner with other Dane County organizations, such as the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Clubs, MSCR, and of course, neighborhood schools."

One of seven women on the local board, Treiber hopes to expand the Dane County program. The current program, held at Shorewood School, is primarily composed of third through fifth grade girls from the area. Kate Martin, from Thoreau Elementary School, loves that she's made new friends through the program.

Treiber would like Girls on the Run to become an integral part of already established after-school programs and neighborhood centers, as well. That way, more girls could participate and the program could be run in regularly scheduled 12-week sessions in the spring and fall, each culminating in participation in a 5-kilometer race.

Each spring, Madison hosts the Race for the Cure to benefit breast cancer research, treatment, and education; then during the winter holiday season, the Arthritis Foundation has its annual 5-kilometer Jingle Bell Run and Walk. These events provide an opportunity for the girls to show their new found physical abilities. More importantly, they offer a capstone achievement to culminate the Girls on the Run experience.

Although there's a sliding fee scale in place for Girls on the Run, Treiber considers additional funding critical to its widespread success. A family with a gross income above \$50,000 annually would pay \$150 per program participant. But even then, it may be difficult to enroll siblings in the program. Likewise, families with lower incomes still may find reduced fees a stretch. Therefore, Treiber is trying to create a scholarship fund so that any eligible girl could participate.

"But it's as much for the women who coach as for the girls," she adds. All coaching is on a volunteer basis. Volunteers need not have previous coaching experience, because the program has a detailed curriculum to allow anyone to lead the sessions. Weinkauff says, "Anyone who's passionate can do it."

\ For more information

Information on Girls on the Run of Dane County is available through www.madison.com/communities/girlsontherundaneco, 234-8078, girlsontherundaneco@yahoo.com or Girls on the Run of Dane County, P.O. Box 5563, Madison, Wis. 53705. Registration for the fall session, Sept. 8 to Dec. 6, will be accepted through Friday.

For Girls on the Run International, visit www.girlsontherun.org.

\ If you go

What: Komen Madison Race for a Cure coed 5-kilometer (3.1-mile)

run and walk and 1-mile fun course.

When: 8:30 a.m. Saturday.

Where: Willow Island at the Alliant Center at John Nolen Drive and Rimrock Road.

Registration: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday at East Towne Mall, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday at West Towne Mall and 6 a.m. to 7:45 a.m. Saturday at the race start.

Cost: \$30, \$10 for children ages 6 to 12 and free for children 5 and under without a T-shirt.

Information: www.madisonraceforthecure.com and 1-800-435-3405.

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