

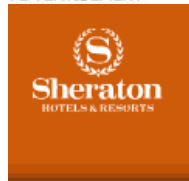
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health and safety

Running for their lives

Girls' program teaches mental and physical fitness

By DIANE MOUSKOURIE
Special to The News Journal
11/29/2006

When Debbie Straub took on the challenge of coaching the Girls on the Run team at MOT Charter School in Middletown, she had one thing on her mind: sharing her passion for running.

"Running has been a part of my life since I was a kid," Straub said. "It's kind of like my medicine for life."

Girls on the Run of New Castle County is an after-school program for girls in the third through fifth grades. During two weekly meetings, girls learn how to become fit, physically and mentally, through classes, exercise and training for a 5K run -- about 3.1 miles. While training, they learn about themselves, their friends and their community, Straub said.

It seems to be working, one girl at a time.

For Madelynne McDonald, an 11-year-old student at the charter school, joining was more about doing something for her community, she said.

"I'm not really any good at other sports, but I have three brothers and I'm always running with them," she said.

Another student, Sarah Kruger, 9, said she just likes to run.

"I've been running for three years," she said.

Valuable life lessons

Although the original Girls on the Run program started in Charlotte, N.C., in 1996, it wasn't until the fall of 2005 that a chapter opened in New Castle County. That's when Catherine Gregory of Wilmington moved to Delaware and realized there were no chapters locally, she said.

Gregory had run her first 5K race in Charlotte two years earlier and became intrigued with the young girls who participated.

"They were so happy and cheering each other on," Gregory said.

After doing some research into the program Gregory became a volunteer coach.

"I immediately fell in love with the curriculum," she said. "The lessons we were teaching the girls resonated with me, as I think they do with all women."

Gregory said each lesson aims to keep girls out of the "girl box." She describes that box as a phase that some girls experience around the fifth grade, a time when they begin feeling less than adequate (not as pretty or thin or smart enough), she said.

"I know that there have been times in my life that I have been in that girl box and would be surprised to find any woman who hasn't," Gregory said. "At Girls on the Run, we try to increase each girl's self-esteem to keep her out of that box."

When Gregory moved to Delaware she wanted to continue delivering that message.

"The message of [the program] was so powerful to me that I wanted to do whatever I could to share the



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Rachael Wagner (clockwise from left), 10, and Casey Marker, 10, both of Townsend, Danielle Brown, 10, and Ashley Duffy, 8, both of Middletown, Allison Johannsen, 10, of Townsend, Sarah Kruger, 9, of Smyrna, and Madelynne McDonald, 11, of Townsend, surround their coach, Debbie Straub.



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Allison Johannsen, 10, of Townsend, practices with Girls on the Run at MOT Charter School. She's been learning about herself, her friends and her community.

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