



## 'Girls on the Run' helps preteens get jump on life

### Nationwide program teaches emotional and physical fitness

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. - Kate Alexander takes care each morning in picking out just the right outfit to wear that day. She spends extra time straightening her shoulder-length blonde hair.

Then she's ready for school.

Kate is only 8 years old.

Concerned that her third-grader is too engrossed with TV and magazine images, Jeanne Alexander sought an after-school program that could teach Kate to accept herself and have a healthy body image.

She found it in Girls on the Run, a Charlotte-based nonprofit group that tries to ease the awkward transition from little girl to young lady. The group uses running-themed activities to focus on emotional, mental and character development.

#### **Focus on preteen emotional development**

Although Girls on the Run is centered around running and — ultimately — training for a 5K race, it focuses more on preteen emotional development than fitness.

Some girls join because they like to run, others because their friends participate. Some, like Kate, are there because their parents think it's good for them.

"I wanted to get Kate involved in something that had a lot of positive issues for girls that they don't normally get, and can compete with the ideas that they are getting in the media," Alexander said. "We could have done soccer or anything else, but this program really had ideals that are important to me."

Started by Charlotte native Molly Barker in 1996 with just 13 girls, the program is now in over 100 cities in the United States and Canada. The target age is grades 3-5, but girls who want to continue can graduate into Girls on Track through the eighth grade.

Each 12-week program is broken into three segments: What makes me special? How am I alike? What's our role as girls and women in society? It ends with a community project each group runs on its own.

#### **Lessons taught through running**

The lessons are taught through running activities. Each girl has the opportunity to run at least one mile — although Barker says she allows them to "run, walk, skip, hop or cartwheel around the track, just so long as they are moving" — by the time each Girls on the Run session is over.

"I like to run, so this is fun," said 9-year-old Amelia Loydpierson. "But also, we are learning to be true to yourself and to be healthy and to be a strong person."

The program starts with a light warm-up at a middle school track, then the girls get in a circle to discuss positive people. Each is encouraged to reveal the most positive person they know.

"You are, Miss Molly," one girl says to their leader and coach.

"My mom is very positive," 10-year-old Gabi Stephens says. "Whenever someone says something bad about someone, my mom always says, 'I'm sure there are good things about them, too.'"

When another girl then says Gabi is the most positive person she knows, Barker asks the group if Gabi could have learned that from her mother.

When the consensus is yes, Barker deems Gabi worthy of a special cheer.

"Superstar!" the girls all yell at Gabi, throwing their hands at her like overexcited cheerleaders.

When it's over, the girls meet back in their circle for their rewards. There are no material items given out; the rewards are always special cheers or — on this day — the chance to hold a baby in attendance.

### **'Be who you are'**

"Every girl who comes into this world is special and shouldn't have to jump through hoops to be something they see in a magazine," Barker said. "So we're here to say, 'Be who you are, don't be afraid to express yourself. You are beautiful the way you are.'"

"And the running, the opportunity to learn how to exercise and get healthy, is just an added bonus."

It's a message that comes from Barker's own struggles with self-image while growing up. For years, she said, she was stuck in the "Girl Box," a phrase she uses heavily in the program and defines as the idea that "you are supposed to morph into" someone who's pretty, quiet and thin. "And be blonde is probably in there somewhere, too."

Barker's mother was an alcoholic but took up running when she kicked the habit. Barker began running when she found herself struggling with the "Girl Box."

But as a teen, Barker wound up with her own alcohol problem that continued into adulthood. Over the years, she was able to hide behind the facade of an athlete — she's participated in four Ironman competitions — and as a schoolteacher.

"Appearance-sake, I had it altogether," she said.

Internally, though, she was a mess. Fighting the bottle and depression in 1993, she considered suicide. Her sister encouraged her to get a good night of sleep, and when Barker awoke the next morning she went for a run.

This run was different. She said she had an epiphany that suddenly overwhelmed her with an inner peace and instant calmness.

"I just felt perfect and connected with everything that was around me," she said.

Barker stopped drinking that day and now believes it was that epiphany that was the birth of the idea for Girls on the Run.

Now a mother of two, she spends her time seeking sponsors for Girls on the Run — New Balance is a primary source — and helping others launch the program in new cities. She helps set the curriculum, which has evolved over the years.

"Now we cover topics like bullying and plastic surgery," she said. "Neither of those were issues when this started."

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