

Girls enter womanhood on the run

By Hope Anderson

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She didn't want to shed her backpack or jacket, even when the girls were pounding their feet on the pavement and pumping their arms. During discussions, she wouldn't share her ideas or even sit with the group.

She didn't trust them enough.

Fast-forward 10 weeks: On a recent Thursday afternoon, she huddled together with the rest of Olympic Elementary School's Girls on the Run group of fourth- and fifth-grade girls, giggling and sipping hot chocolate.

Later, in the school's gym, she closed her eyes and let herself fall in a "trust game," having faith that her newfound friends and coaches would catch her before she smacked the gym floor. (And, of course, they caught her.)

"It's incredible, she's 100 percent there now," said JoLee Ford, Olympic's school nurse and the organizer of the school's Girls on the Run program. She asked that the girl not be named. "I just hope that some little piece of this will stay with her that this was an environment that experienced trusting other kids and trusting other adults, and it was positive."

The story is one of many that Ford and her fellow coach, registered dietician Peggy Norman, can tell about their first 12-week program of Girls on the Run, which is part of a Charlotte, N.C.-based nonprofit group that promotes physical and mental health among girls.

Olympic is the first local school to have a Girls on the Run program, although Ford and Norman hope the idea will catch on at other schools.

The program involves running and ultimately training for a 5K event, but it centers on preteen emotional development and easing the transition from little girl to young woman.

"The whole purpose behind this program is self-esteem and trying to help establish a solid foundation so each girl feels good about herself, as opposed to comparing herself to the kid next door," Ford said.

Ford and Norman started the first session three months ago with a dozen girls from Olympic Elementary, where the enrollment for the group is on a first-come-first-served basis. The pair is planning another session this winter.

Ford learned of the program last spring after reading an Associated Press story printed in The Daily News. It stuck like a burr in her mind, she said, until she got the program off the ground.

Ford and Norman, who are volunteering their time, were trained last summer in Charlotte, thanks to funding from the Cowlitz County Human Services department.

The Girls on the Run program was started in 1996 by Molly Barker, a Charlotte native, with just 13 girls. Now it's in 100 cities in the U.S. and Canada. The program targets girls in grades three through five, but Ford and Norman decided to go with fourth- and fifth-graders for the first time around.

The group at Olympic got together for two afternoons each week. They started with a healthy after-school

snack, provided by the Cowlitz County Health Department. The group then discussed subjects such as gossip, how to make friends, having a healthy body image and taking responsibility.

The lessons were reinforced with activities and games tied to the lesson's themes. The group also ran at the track at Longview Memorial Stadium, building up endurance for the 5K event.

The girls encouraged each other, calling each other by their Girls on the Run nicknames, such as "Gorgeous Gabby" and "Vibrant Val." In a circle, they'd strike a pose like enthusiastic cheerleaders and yell, "Superstar!"

Laurie Roberson said her daughter, "Delightful Dani," is just "thriving on this."

Dani, a 9-year-old fourth-grader, is whipping up healthy snacks at home that she's tried at Girls on the Run.

The program keeps kids off the couch, Roberson said.

"I was just blown away," Roberson said. "I can't say enough nice things about (the program)."

Last week, the group -- now down to eight girls -- wrapped up the session with a festive 5K running event on Thursday afternoon. Families and friends turned out with signs -- "Go Dani Go" and "We are proud of you" -- to cheer on the runners.

Some spectators took a few turns around the track with the girls, who circled it 12 times in all. The girls kept track of their progress by getting a Magic Marker line drawn on their wrist for each lap.

"Each girl has her plan," Ford told the crowd. Some of the girls alternated between walking and running, their breaths coming in puffs in the chilly air.

"I think they're kind of impressed with themselves," Norman said of the girls' preparation for the event.

Ford added, "And they should be."