

## Girls on the Run arrives in Delaware

### Program targeting pre-teens to debut

By KEVIN TRESOLINI / The News Journal  
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Several years ago, Catherine Gregory's own blossoming interest in running led her to enter the Girls on the Run 5K in Charlotte, N.C., where she was living.

It turned out to be a life-altering experience.

"I was surrounded by all these girls chanting, 'Girls on the Run is so much fun!' " said Gregory, who now lives in Wilmington. "I thought, if I feel this good being in my 20s, how must they feel? I've been involved in it ever since."

That association culminates this fall when Girls on the Run, a national program for 8- through 11-year-olds, makes its Delaware debut, with Gregory as its driving force. The program was founded in 1996 by Molly Barker, a triathlete, teacher and counselor from Charlotte.

Girls on the Run programs are now operated in more than 100 cities in the United States, with more than 30,000 girls having completed it. It spawned another similar venture, Girls on Track, for girls 12-14.

The 12-week program includes 24 one-hour sessions. Cost is \$150. The sessions are divided into three four-week segments entitled "All About Me," "Building My Team" and "Community Begins with Me." Each involves stretching and running activities that incorporate dialogue and games.

"It's about building self-esteem and encouraging living a healthy lifestyle," Gregory said. "I wish there was something like this for me growing up. I remember times when I was 'too skinny' and the last one picked."

Pre-teen girls are targeted because they're approaching an age when peer and societal influences can negatively affect their choices and their self-image, said Gregory. Among the potential future obstacles in their way are teen pregnancy, substance abuse, eating disorders and depression. Girls on the Run attempts to give participants a head start on avoiding those pitfalls, she said.

"If I was still that age, I think it would be a good program to join," said 14-year-old Jessie Nimmerichter, entering her sophomore year at Middletown High, where she runs cross country.

"You can build a lot of different skills that could get you ready for high school."

An evaluation of the program by Dr. Rita DiGiacchino DeBate of the UNC-Charlotte Department of Health Behavior determined girls in the program showed a "significant" improvement in self-esteem and attitude.

By choosing running as their vehicle, Girls on the Run has tapped into one of the most popular sports among school girls. One of the Delaware coaches, Wilmington resident Annie Pilson, began running as a pre-teen more than 25 years ago and looks forward to providing others with that opportunity.

"I love the peace of mind I get when I run," said the 38-year-old mother of two sons and one daughter. "It's something I like doing for myself.

"I also believe in the self-confidence gained from being around a group of girls from having attended an all-girls high school [Roland Park Country Day in Baltimore]. You always gain something out of achievement, and running's a great way to do it. It's not the only way, but it's worked for me."

In the latest participation studies announced by the National Federation of State High School Associations, outdoor track and field ranked second and cross country fifth among the most popular sports for girls nationally. Basketball is No. 1.

Among females, there were 418,322 outdoor track and field participants and 166,287 cross-country runners nationally that school year.

A USA Track & Field survey announced in April also gave credence to running's prominence. While alluding to the popularity of running at the scholastic and collegiate levels, it also said that nearly 50 percent of the United States' 30 million runners are women.

Also, the number of female participants at road races grew from 28 percent in 1993 to 52 percent in 2003, according to the Road Racing Information Center.

With endeavors such as Girls on the Run, those numbers are likely to increase. But while running is the centerpiece of the program, it is actually a means to an end. The goal isn't to create great runners; it's to mold better girls.

"I like to think of it as a strong inside-out program," Gregory said of the first segment of the three-part curriculum. "It's all about how they feel about things -- decisions and values. The second part is getting along with others and cooperating as a team, but starting with themselves. The third part teaches them that they're part of something bigger."

### **Program builds to December 5K race**

All lead up to the girls running a 5-kilometer (3.1-mile) event and also performing a community-service project. The girls will run in Michelle's Big Red 5K on Dec. 17. Other runners will be invited to serve as "running buddies" to participate alongside the girls and offer encouragement.

"We hope to have our own 5K race as the program grows," Gregory said.

Area residents Pilson, Kim Chitty, Ann Marie Stoltz, Kate Morris and Liz Baldwin will join Gregory as coaches, each of whom must undergo special training. The Boys and Girls Club on Union Street and the tracks used by the Tower Hill School and Ursuline Academy teams are likely sites.

Chitty and Pilson are running partners who saw a flier for Girls on the Run at the Delaware Running Company in Greenville. Chitty is from Charlotte and her mother, Linde Mullis, had told her how a friend's daughter had benefited from the program.

"In the little bit of time I've had to spend looking at the curriculum, I'm overwhelmed and impressed with the detail," said Chitty, 38, who has two daughters. "The three sessions basically

focus on individual, group and community. You're teaching and educating them in ways they don't even realize. They gain so much from each other, and I'm sure I'll learn from it, too."

### Footnotes

There's no stopping Bear ultraman David Bursler, who finished ninth out of 240 runners in the recent Vermont Trail 100-mile race in 18:56:12. ... Those interested in group runs may want to join the cast at the Tower Hill School track on Mondays and Thursdays at 5:30 p.m. or non-competitive gatherings that set off on 3 1/2-, 5-, 7- and 10-mile loops from the Delaware Running Company, on 3801 Kennett Pike at Greenville Center, Wednesdays at 6:15 p.m. ... The Brandywine YMCA is holding a cross country camp for students entering grades 4 through 8 from Aug. 8-12. Phone 478-9622 or email mcoleman@ymcade.org.

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**Catherine Gregory first encountered the Girls on the Run program while she was living in Charlotte, N.C. She is the driving force behind the newly founded Delaware Girls on the Run.**

## GIRLS ON THE RUN OF NEW CASTLE COUNTY

How to join: Contact Catherine Gregory at 302-777-2378 or [Catherine@girlsontherunde.org](mailto:Catherine@girlsontherunde.org). The 12-week program (24 one-hour sessions) begins in September at several Wilmington locations. Cost is \$150. Scholarships will be available.

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