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Girls on the Run are racing toward healthy lives

- Reach Beacon correspondent Irene Bowers at bowersi@aol.com.

BAYSIDE — The members of Girls on the Run are young, strong and on the move. They're also developing healthy minds and bodies .

The six girls, who are fourthgraders at Newtown Road Elementary, are the recipients of a national organization's efforts to help them become healthy adults.

They, along with another group of girls at Norfolk Collegiate, are the area's pioneers for the program.

"It's fun. The running gives me more energy," said Elexus Miller, 9. "I'd like to do this when I'm grown up."

Deni Trombino, social studies chair at Bayside High, read about Girls on the Run in Runner's World magazine and contacted the nonprofit group to volunteer.

The closest group was in Richmond. The organization paired her with Helen Dragas, and, 18 months later, Girls on the Run of South Hampton Roads began.

"Without the financial assistance of the Dragas Corp. and generous shoe scholarships from New Balance Athletic Shoe, we would not be able to do this," said Trombino.

Co-director Susan Tweed has brought Sentara on board, and the Virginia Beach Foundation is managing the finances for the fledgling organization.

"Our goal is to be our own nonprofit in three years," Trombino said. "It's daunting, but worth it."

The program, in more than 100 cities, combines fitness training with games to teach life skills to third- through fifth-graders.

It was started in 1996 by former Iron Man triathlete Molly Barker .

Barker, who authored "Girls on Track" and has appeared in People magazine and on TV networks ESPN and CNN, visited Virginia Beach this summer to train the Hampton Roads' coaches.

Along with Trombino, volunteers Penny Laderberg and Susan Gill train the girls for 90 minutes after school, twice a week for 12 weeks.

At the end, the girls participate in a local 5K race.

"I saw athletics help my daughters and believe this is really important," said Laderberg.

"The issues facing girls cut across socioeconomic lines. There is tremendous pressure to look a certain way, act a certain way, and much of it comes at a cost to their self-esteem and health."

"The running helps my daughter feel good about herself," said Sharlene Baker, mother of Shanice Cordele. "She gets a lot of positive reinforcement."

"You develop a child from the inside out," said Principal Linda Hayes. "I am intensely interested in promoting selfrespect and positive thinking."

The program will be offered again in the spring, and financial assistance is available.

“One thing that sets it apart is the physical training,” Hayes said.

“I have been so impressed with the coaches – they never miss a day, and these girls respond to their commitment.”

Trombino, who targeted Newtown Road Elementary because it is one of the feeder schools to Bayside High, said the program will expand to Norfolk Academy next year.

She plans to stay with the program at Newtown Road Elementary.

“This is a good slice of America – diverse and wonderful,” she said.

“And, same as everywhere, girls here face tremendous pressures as they mature. This program gives them the tools to become healthy, productive adults.”

- For details about Girls on the Run of South Hampton Roads, e-mail satweed@sentara.com, or call 455-7236.



Brianna Hunter, left, Moniyah Loving, Elexus Miller, Shanice Cordle, Hope Threat and Alexys Brooks take a breather from Girls on the Run training with coaches Susan Gill, left, Deni Trombino and Penny Laderberg.
IRENE BOWERS