



Girls on the Run learn valuable lessons

By Jessie Thompson
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There's a reason for the cliché "vicious rumors."

"Today's lesson about gossip really stuck out," says Meghann Hansen, a 10-year-old fifth grader at Holy Cross School. "Everyone's done it before and ... when we talked about it, we talked about why not to do it - which is because it could hurt you and the person it's about and the people gossiping, too." The lesson she's referring to is Girls on the Run's Lesson No. 12: "Gossiping is a Bad Habit."

It's one of 24 in an innovative, 12-week program that combines lessons in self-empowerment, healthy decision-making and body image with warm-ups and workouts to train for a 5K.

The organization was started by Charlotte, N.C., native Molly Barker in 1996 with 13 girls. (See accompanying story.) Now, it now has affiliates in more than 100 cities in the United States and Canada - including Lynchburg's newly formed, 28-member Girls on the Run of Holy Cross Regional Catholic School.

"The program encourages emotional, social, mental, physical and spiritual development," says Erin Parkhurst, a coach who is also in charge of development and public relations for the group. "There are athletic programs for pre-adolescent girls through school and community organizations in Lynchburg, but none of them integrate athletics with training in social and personal skills.

"One Girls on the Run lesson plan, for example, teaches the importance of expressing emotions by getting the girls to answer questions like what do you do when you're really angry, and what happens to you if you do not express how you are feeling? Girls learn to talk about emotions in healthy ways while completing a challenging, but fun and manageable physical workout."

Getting physical

The lessons are taught through running activities - or walking or skipping or hopping or cartwheeling.

"Just as long as they're moving," says Mary Hansen, who serves as one of four coaches and who has been instrumental in getting the local program going.

She and another friend had heard about a running group for young girls, something she was interested in because she has three. When they did a bit of research about Girls on the Run, "we found it was more than just a running club, and we got very excited about their concepts," says Hansen. "It was more involved than we originally thought, but these lessons, and our children, are so valuable to us that the increased time was not an impediment." Last summer, Hansen and the two other Lynchburg coaches, Julie Pierce and Colleen Dougherty, signed up for extensive training at the Girls on the Run headquarters in Charlotte. They learned, among other things, how to deliver the curriculum effectively and how to run a group of girls, age 8 to 13.

"We were very impressed, we like what they did," says Hansen. "We liked the other women there for training too, it was so diverse, but we could come together with like-minded goals."

The lessons they learned are delivered to the girls in three, four-week parts: "All About Me," "Building My Team," and "Community Begins With Me."

Each meeting starts with the girls getting into a circle to learn about the day's lesson. Then there is a warm-up time that centers around the lesson and a discussion, a workout wrapped into activity - one week it was running bingo, another it was a scavenger hunt, another it was a run along Blackwater Creek Trail - then the girls meet back in the circle for more discussion.

When someone's performed well, she'll get a reward - nothing material - "an energy award," in the form of a dance or a cheer.

"It's kind of silly, kind of dorky," says Hansen, "but when you're in the center getting that special attention, it feels good. It's such a positive exchange of energy. ... The point is to celebrate girls and women."

Seeing results

It sounds great. But does it work?

Anecdotaly, here, the answer is yes.

Ali Roach, 8, a third-grader whose mother signed her up for the program says she enjoys the running part, but "it's kind of more of cooperating with and listening to everybody."

She says she's gained "bravery and the confidence to do something I wouldn't have before."

"It's very fun," she says. "I love going."

An academic evaluation of the program supports it, also.

Rita DiGiacchino DeBate, Ph.D., of the UNC-Charlotte Department of Health Behavior, determined girls in the program showed a "significant" improvement in self-esteem and attitude.

Pre-teen girls are targeted, says Girls on the Run literature, because they're approaching an age when self-image will battle peer and societal influences - teen pregnancy, substance abuse, eating disorders and depression.

"Girls this age are still receptive to adult influence while beginning to feel peer pressure," says Parkhurst, so Girls on the Run also promotes talking with parents, so girls don't find themselves in bad situations.

In addition to potentially lowering at-risk behavior, the program includes a community service project.

"... (It) culminates in a non-competitive, 5K celebration run," says Parkhurst, "which gives the girls a chance to shine, an opportunity to contribute to their community and an overwhelming sense of accomplishment."

The Money Part

Such success does not come free.

Holy Cross Regional Catholic School is a sponsor of the program, which is open to any girl 8 to 13. The school provides Girls on the Run with the use of its facilities and covers the group under its general liability insurance.

Genworth Financial is also a major supporter. Financial contributions allowed the purchase of the program, along with renewal fees to Girls on the Run International for the next two years, and operating expenses for its first year.

The group has also gotten non-financial support from Randolph-Macon Woman's College and Riverside Runners.

To sign up, or for more information on the program, or how to become a sponsor or a volunteer contact Julie Pierce at (434) 384-0770 or

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