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Getting off on the right foot


Girls on the Run program is all about a variety of positive steps

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Categorizing Girls on the Run as just another fitness program is vastly underselling it.

The international program, founded and based in Charlotte, arrived in Greenville this fall for its inaugural twice-weekly, 12-week session. Beth Fowler, mother of 12-year-old Kaylee, is glad it did.

"I've asked Kaylee for several years to go run with me," said Fowler, an aerobics instructor at the Greenville Hospital System's Life Center. "But running for a 12-year-old is probably not that much fun."

That's where Girls on the Run shines. Fowler said the coaches "kind of sneak in the running" while educating the girls about food choices, overall health and more.

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"I'd ask her how far she ran after class," Fowler said about her daughter, a student at Bob Jones Academy, "and she'd say she didn't really know.

"I thought she might get bored with this. But she had to miss class one time, and you would have thought the world was going to end."

Girls on the Run is for third- through fifth-graders, while a companion program called Girls on Track is for sixth-through eighth-graders. Since its kickoff in 1996, it has spread to 120 sites in the United States and Canada.

The non-profit program trains youngsters to complete a 5K (3.1-mile) race while also enhancing self-esteem and encouraging emotional, social, mental, spiritual and physical development, according to the Girls on the Run International Web site.

For the local group, the 5K was Saturday at the Paris Mountain Road Race. There, a group of 76, which included the Girls and many of their parents, completed the 5K run at Furman University.

"The nice thing is, it's getting parents running, too," said Kim Hein, who directed the Greenville program through the GHS Children's Hospital.

Lisa Butler said she was surprised her daughter, Elyse, wanted to run. "We're a family of couch potatoes," she said. "But now, there's a conscious effort to be healthy."

In fact, Butler said, she's surprised in the changes in her daughter, a fourth-grader at Powdersville Elementary School.

"She's become more active because of it," Butler said. "She's more self-confident. She's joined a dance class now."

And for Christmas, Butler said, her daughter wants "a treadmill instead of an Xbox. "She wants to be able to exercise if the weather is bad," she said.

Fowler agreed that the changes in her daughter border on startling.

"Kaylee is not the healthiest eater," she said. "She'd live off French fries and chicken nuggets if she could.

"She tasted things she probably never would have without peer pressure. And now, she's even eating fruit. She'll say, 'Mom, get some apples at the grocery store.' And I'll go, 'What?' "

Because the first class was so successful, a Girls on the Track program is scheduled for February, and several more Girls on the Run classes will be held in the spring as well, Hein said.

"There will be several sites, and we're getting interest from schools, too," she said.

After seeking applicants for volunteer coaches, Hein got an indication of how popular the program might be as she was "slammed" with responses.

"I haven't even been able to get back to all of them," she said.

To prepare to meet the demand, Hein said she will hold a coaches training class Jan. 20.

"We don't really know how big this will get," she said. "There's one site in Vermont where they have 1,500 girls involved."

On Saturday, the pack of 34 girls, all dressed in teal Girls on the Run T-shirts and sporting festive Hawaiian leis, ran and sometimes walked through the 5K course. Fowler said she is just amazed.

"Now, she's looking at opportunities to do other runs," Fowler said of her daughter. "I think she's gotten the bug. She's definitely into it now."
