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Run away with these 'Girls'



Get off the Couch

By Rachel Collins

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These days both Julia Remillard and her mother, Susan, think nothing of lacing up their shoes and running two or more miles.

In fact, the Kittery Point, Maine, residents are veteran road racers, having run their way through a few seasons together.

But what's remarkable about this mother-daughter team is that Julia is only 12 years old and until a little more than year ago she hadn't considered running at all.

"I was not a runner," said the sixth-grader who attends Cornerstone Montessori School in Stratham. "But it's really fun."

That is the power of the international nonprofit Girls on the Run International, Susan Remillard said.

Girls ages 8 to 13 -- in grades 3 through 8 -- get together for some conversation and some running and before they know it, they're making friends, learning a few things and running even more.

Case in point -- Julia, on her own, decided to run more than two miles at 7 a.m. five days a week this summer with two of her friends to be ready for a neighboring town's four mile road race in July.

With programs in more than 120 cities across North America, GOTRI has encouraged tens of thousands of girls and women not only to just get up and run, but to develop a sense of health, self-respect and confidence.

"It lights a fire in them about their fitness and how good you can feel about your body if you work out and take care of yourself," said Susan Remillard, who got back to running herself as the volunteer coach of Julia's group. "I think it stays with them."

Julia said she "never would have thought of doing it without Girls on the Run."

"It definitely made me like running better," said Remillard, who started up with the program in fifth grade. "And it definitely makes you open up more when the other girls

are there."

After all, the 10- to 12-week, 24-lesson after-school program is part fitness, part communicating.

The philosophy of the nonprofit prevention program for pre-teen girls is to encourage participants to develop self-respect and healthy lifestyles through running. The curriculum addresses all aspects of a girl's development -- the physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual well-being. There are two levels -- "Girls on the Run" for third- to fifth-graders and "Girls on Track" for sixth- to eighth-graders.

It all began in 1996 when Molly Barker, an accomplished triathlete and high school chemistry teacher, started up the program in Charlotte, N.C., because she felt there was something missing in her life.

Two years later the group went international and now Barker, the group's founder and "vision keeper," has just published her second book, "Girls Lit from Within: A Guide to Life Outside of the Girl Box."

Barker said her goal with GOTRI is to keep girls from losing their identities during adolescence -- something she admits she did right through her early adulthood.

She calls the trap that many girls fall into during their pre-teens and beyond the "Girl Box."

"The Girl Box' is this imaginary place where many girls go around sixth grade," Barker said in the book. "In the Girl Box' we say farewell to the really cool girl that we are and we begin to try to be a girl we think will make us popular."

Barker, who began running at the age of 15 with her mother, decided in her 20s that the only time she "felt like (her) old self again" was when she was running.

That is what inspired her to introduce running to other girls, mixed with a hefty dose of confidence building and education.

"I thought it was going to be more running than talking about issues," said Julia Remillard. "It was a good combination of both."

For instance, after the 10 to 14 girls spent time talking in the twice-a-week program, held at her Stratham school, they would often incorporate something they talked about into a physical game like running to tag each other with labels that had "emotion" words on them.

Whitney Edgar, of the New Outlook Teen Center in Exeter, helped coach a "Girls on Track" session last fall.

"The group of girls we had were very diverse, from a wide variety of backgrounds," she said. "Each time we met we had a topical discussion about something like healthy friends or managing your emotions then we would match that to a physical activity."

Currently Lyndi Sargent, who has headed up Girls on the Run in New Hampshire since 2000 and had 200 girls take part last year, is encouraging others to set up area programs. She said this year they're even looking at maybe starting a before-school program.

"These girls are at a high risk time -- and they're pre-high school -- so it's a good time to catch them if you can," Susan Remillard said. "Girls on Track's' whole approach is that girls around this age fall into the box' and will do anything to fit into the mold to be accepted. This encourages them to be themselves."

Topical issues like dating, sexual harassment, drugs, alcohol, popularity, cliques, friendship, nutrition and eating disorders are all subjects that can come up for discussion.

"There are a lot of tough issues," Remillard said. "This provides them a good, safe place to talk about them."

And, fit around that, is the running.

"It's all about just cheering one another on, so you still get a sense of team," Susan Remillard said. "We even came up with a team cheer. But we never have those win or lose moments."

Sara Schultz, whose 9-year-old daughter Carolyn did the "Girls on the Run" program in Grades 3 and 4 at Stratham Hill Park, agreed.

"They work really hard to empower the girls, which is always good," she said.

And Carolyn said "it was really fun" running her first 5K race.

"It's really about the underlying value of your physical well-being and how it overflows into all aspects of your life," Sargent said. "When you feel good about your body, you feel good about yourself."

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GET ON THE RUN

Girls on the Run International has two programs available.

"Girls on the Run" which is for third- to fifth-graders and "Girls on Track" for sixth- to eighth-graders.

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Coordinator Lyndi Sargent said the New Hampshire organization is looking for coaches and those willing to either run a program or host a road race in the spring.

Though the cost is \$125 for a girl to participate, she said no one is turned away because of an inability to pay since scholarships and sliding scale pricing is available.

To apply online or for information about New Hampshire's programs, go to www.girlsontherun.org/newhampshire.html or call Lyndi Sargent at 778-1389.

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