

# Bellevue Leader

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## Self-respect puts 'girls on the run'

By: Stephanie Queen , Leader staff writer



She was a little bit overweight and the slowest of the group.

All of her friends had finished the race as she jogged heavily toward the finish line. But instead of ignoring the girl or pointing fingers at her, the rest of the group of runners lined the path to the end. Their cheers bounced off the treetops and into her ears as she pumped her legs to finish the race.

When she crossed the line, her friends surrounded her, hugging her. She was presented a medal for finishing because there were no losers of the race.

Moments like these are common sights during the final race of "Girls on the Run," a national program dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyles and self-respect among girls in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades.

"It's a fabulous program for elementary girls," said Jenny Howard, area coordinator for GOTR. "It teaches empowerment at an age when it really sinks in."

Girls on the Run is a program that teaches young girls about self-esteem, working with others and maintaining healthy emotional and physical lifestyles, all the while promoting physical fitness through moderate exercises.

"It's about getting that balance," Howard said. "When you're healthy, that empowers everything about you."

GOTR began in 1998 when Molly Barkin decided to start the program to help get young girls out of the "girl box" they fell into because of their concern with being popular. She felt a program that taught girls at a young age to accept themselves would help them later in life when the lessons could come into play.

Howard has been with GOTR since the program began in Nebraska three years ago. Her daughter, Delaney, 12, had participated in GOTR when they lived in Virginia, and Howard wanted to get the program established in Nebraska.

The program is usually held at local elementary schools after classes during the spring and fall. Girls meet with their "coaches" for one hour twice a week for eight weeks. Coaches teach them lessons dealing with communication, taking care of one's body, saying no to drugs, cooperating with others, listening, the harm of gossip, standing up for yourself and being beautiful on the inside and out. The lessons are interspersed with various exercises that are not about being competitive but staying healthy and driving the lessons home.

The program winds up with a 5K run at Elmwood Park in Omaha.

This year, St. Mary's Grade School has volunteered its facilities to host the program in Bellevue. Last fall, St. Matthew Grade School hosted GOTR.

Shari Barrios, a team training coach for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Wellness Society, coached the group of 12 girls who participated in GOTR last fall at St. Matthew.

"It was a very positive experience," Barrios said. "The girls were very enthusiastic in participating. It's a way to have fun when you exercise because it takes off the intimidation factor of competition."

Barrios said she thinks the all-girl atmosphere is a positive factor in the success of the program.

"Their inhibitions are down," she said. "The girls can be silly with one another and they're not judged by their athletic ability. It was fantastic."

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Barrios' daughter Sierra, now a fourth-grader, participated in GOTR last year with her mother coaching. Sierra said GOTR has helped her make good decisions now not to drink, do drugs or bow to peer pressure when she is older.

The program costs \$80 per girl, which covers all the class sessions, supplies and curriculum, incentive prizes, insurance, T-shirt, water bottle and the final 5K event. Howard said the cost should not deter families from letting their girls join because scholarships are available.

Mary Cox and her family moved to Bellevue six months ago, and her daughter, Victoria, 9, will be participating in GOTR for the first time after Cox heard about it and decided to get involved with organizing it at St. Mary's.

"I like the idea," Cox said. "It was a no-brainer for me. A lot of young girls are trapped in there."

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