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## Miles of smiles: Girls on the Run sign-up coming up

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March 16, 2007

This spring some 1,500 Vermont girls in grades 3-8 will lace up their sneakers and compete in a 5K run.

In doing so, they'll not only be heading for a finish line, but also taking steps to become healthy, vibrant and positive young ladies.

Who finishes the 5K race first will matter little to the organizers of the event. What really is important is the life lessons running can teach.

Hundreds of young Vermont girls from Bennington to Wheelock and about 75 other schools in between will be participating in the Girls on the Run program this spring -- a specially designed fitness program designed to promote positive emotional, social, mental and physical development.

Sign up and registration for the program begins later this month -- some as soon as next week. Girls who do not have a program at their school can usually find a nearby team to join.

This will be the seventh season Girls on the Run has been, well, running in Vermont, part of a national program that started in 1996 in Charlotte, N.C., the brainchild of triathlete Molly Barker.

According to the Girls on the Run Web site, Barker developed a 24-lesson curriculum to help ease a girl's passage into adolescence, a time that Barker found herself "stuck in the 'girl box,' where only girls who were a certain size with a certain beauty were popular; where girls who wanted to fit in had to mold their bodies and their personalities to fit the requirements of the box."

Burlington's Mary Beth Nuovo is the northern Vermont coordinator for Girls on the Run, which actually has two programs (one for girls in grades 3-5 and another for girls in grades 6-8).

"It's infectious," Nuovo, who coaches the Mater Christi team, said. "I'm a very recreational runner -- I don't even look like a runner -- but part of the program stresses that running is for everybody. Even if the girls decide not to become runners, the goal is to try to teach them the joy of moving and taking care of themselves and the self-respect that comes with it."

Vermont's program started with 30 girls in Vernon and has increased in size each year.

"It's phenomenal the way it's growing," Nuovo said. "It's a challenge now just to keep up with the demand."

The program has attracted corporate sponsors -- including Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Vermont -- while Gov. Jim Douglas' Fit & Healthy Kids The Fit Initiative has provided funding and scholarships.

Key to Girls on the Run's success has been in taking what can be a competitive activity and making it into an educational and fun nine-week program.

Nuovo said the program is broken into three parts. At first, the girls learn about taking care of their own physical and mental health. The middle part of the program focuses on teamwork, and the final third concentrates on

being part of a community. Most teams perform some sort of community service, and all participants are invited to a big end-of-the-season 5K party.

Practices highlight positive contributions.

"It's an individual sport," Nuovo said, "but it's still fun to be part of a group."

Barker will be the featured speaker at the northern Vermont season-ender, scheduled to be held June 10 at the University of Vermont.

For the races -- where every girl wears bib No. 1 -- Nuovo says there is a time clock, but girls aren't timed. It's for runners who want to see how they did, Nuovo said.

"I like to tell my team that Girls on the Run is not a running program. It is a beauty program," Nuovo said in an e-mail, "and that they will discover they are at their most beautiful when they are flushed, dripping in sweat, cheering on the teammates and are full of the knowledge that they have challenged themselves and have completed something they might never have imagined possible."

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