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Girls on the Run

After-school program helps girls focus on what's important

Bursting with energy after a day in the classroom, a pixie of a girl explodes into an irrepressible cheer.

By Jill Callison

jcallis@argusleader.com

Bursting with energy after a day in the classroom, a pixie of a girl explodes into an irrepressible cheer.

"Girls on the Run," she says, pumping her right arm in the air, "is a lot of fun!"

And it is fun, with games, socializing, small rewards and a chance to exercise without the pressure of keeping score.

But Teri Roest, one of two coaches of the Girls on the Run team at Lowell Elementary School, never forgets that the character-building program has a serious purpose, too.

She wants to make sure a generation of girls grows up not only physically fit but emotionally and spiritually healthy, as well.

"It's a really cool program, with really good, solid goals," Roest says.

"And you spend enough time with the girls that it has the opportunity to really make an impact on their lives."

Twice a week, Roest and her co-coach meet with the eight youngsters enrolled in Girls on the Run at Lowell.

In an hour, they discuss the day's lesson, reinforce it with activities, then spend time running and walking outside.

The ultimate goal is to participate as a team in a 3.1-mile community run on May 19.

But the smaller goals are equally important. That's what brings Roest and other volunteers back twice a week.

"We don't get paid to be here," Roest says. "We're not family members. We're nonjudgmental, and I think it's hugely important for them to know that we as a community care about them."

Founded in 1996, Girls on the Run International piloted in Sioux Falls with two sites in the fall of 2005.

Stacy Stahl, council director for Girls on the Run of Sioux Falls, says the program has 168 girls enrolled at 11 sites here and in Tea.

It now consists of two parts, Girls on the Run for grades three through five and Girls on Track for grades six through eight.

The nonprofit organization, primarily funded through the YWCA and the Sioux Empire United Way, could expand with more financial assistance and added volunteers, Stahl says.

Betty Marsh, a counselor at Lowell Elementary, says several aspects of Girls on the Run will impact participants in the future.

"It's self-esteem, it's talking about girl issues in a safe setting, and the physical exercise, which is energy-boosting and fun, healthy and wholesome."

A recent topic at Lowell was making good decisions about things that can be harmful, such as alcohol, drugs and tobacco.

During the discussion, several girls shared unsettling past experiences, such as the time an older brother coaxed/bullied one into swallowing unknown pills.

Many people believe that the impact of television and movies has made children today ultra-sophisticated, interested only in stimulation via television and video games, Roest says.

She says that's false.

"They still have the same wants and needs, to be part of a group, to participate, to have fun," Roest says.

During the discussion, fourth-grader Myriaah Schaleski paints a vivid word picture when Roest asks, "Do you know what addictive means?"

"It's kind of like a magnet," Myriaah says, using her hands to illustrate two objects being drawn toward each other.

Sharon Utne is wearing the pink T-shirt she received for taking part in an earlier Girls on the Run 5K. Sharon, now 12 and in fifth grade, came back for another session because, she says simply, "I had fun."

Brown-eyed Kristen McGovern also is a Girls on the Run veteran.

"It's really fun," she says in a rush, "and it gets you moving so you don't just sit down. We learn things, and we meet new friends, and we learn the things to do and to not do because if you do those things that are bad, you can't run so fast."

Melodydie Ware, 11, and Shanah Hoffman, 9, met through the program.

Would the fifth-grader and fourth-grader have become friends if not for Girls on the Run?

"Probably not," Melodydie says, as she walks side by side with Shanah in a loop around the Lowell playground.

Natasha Bauman doesn't wait for Girls on the Run on Tuesdays and Thursdays to exercise, she says. The third-grader now also runs on the weekend.

For 10-year-old Zakiya Barbour, who spent part of the discussion doodling with markers on her shoes but still managed to not miss a thing, Girls on the Run is one of two programs she take part in. The other is Girl Scouts on Saturdays.

Both programs provide something that Roest says is essential at any age: a support system.

"If we can help be that support system and contribute to their sense of well-being, which we do, then we're doing what we need to do," she says.

Jill Callison's column runs every Thursday. You can reach her at 331-2307.

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