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Girls on Track

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In a society obsessed with beauty and popularity, it's all too easy for young girls to lose self-confidence, putting themselves at greater risk for substance abuse, eating disorders, early sexual contact and depression.

Over the past six weeks, a group of girls tried to change the way they viewed themselves and others as part of a program called Girls on Track.

Eleven girls could be heard giggling and screaming as they ran with enthusiasm around the Raymond R. Rommelt Building's gymnasium, 515 W. Central Ave., after school on Tuesday, the last day of the program.

Offered to girls grades six through eight, Girls on Track provides the opportunity for girls to get together and talk about relationships, nutrition and other self-esteem related topics followed by exercise.

Like its sister program, Girls on the Run, which targets girls in grades three through five, Girls on Track was created by runner and motivational speaker Molly Barker, founder of the non-profit Girls on the Run organization.

Barker says her programs, operated in 130 chapters across North America, help girls escape from what she calls the "girl box": the trap that forces girls into molding their bodies and personalities to fit in with society's stereotypes.

"This program is important to girls because it allows them to find their spirit within and to grow up realizing that they are unique, capable, beautiful and strong young women," said Joan Evans, clinical director for school-based programs at Diakon Family Life Services, 435 W. Fourth St., which sponsors the local program.

"This has been an awesome group of girls," said Pat Russell, volunteer leader and Girls on Track coach and outreach counselor at Diakon. "Not only are they building individual self esteem but a sense of positive community."

This marks the second Girls on Track program offered in Lycoming County and the first program offered during school year. The other was offered this past summer.

Meetings were held twice a week, from 3:15 to 5 p.m. Mondays and Tuesdays, for six weeks.

At each meeting the girls began by sitting in a circle to discuss topics like making healthy choices and defining good relationships.

Tuesday's agenda consisted of the girls' upcoming bake sale.

The group chose to host a bake sale as their required community service project, with proceeds benefiting the local chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

After a main topic was discussed the girls participated in activities related to the topic, followed by discussion of what they learned. The exercise portion followed.

For 45 minutes the girls ran circles around the perimeter of the gymnasium while listening to their favorite music

"They run as much as they can. All we ask is for forward movement," Russell said. "We just ask that they run as best as they can."

Usually the girls will complete anywhere from one and a half to two miles of running and walking.

"For Molly the concept of running was what she built her sensibility around. That helped her finally come square with her life." Russell said. "Although it's not an athletic program, it stresses the importance of nutrition and

physical fitness. It helps the girls feel grounded in who they are.”

After exercising, the girls gather again for a closing meeting.

The girls had nothing but praise for the program when asked about what they enjoyed most.

“I like all of us being together and talking about our lives and how to be healthier. We all have a really good friendship,” Bethany Kerstetter, 12, said.

Emily Green, 11, agreed, “I like that we get to run together and talk. I learned that everybody is a somebody and nobody is a nobody.”

The cost for the program is \$35 according to Evans.

No girl will be denied because of funds,” she said. “We make sure to find scholarship money for any girl that applies.”

The Girls on the Run and Girls on Track programs are open to all girls in Lycoming County, Evans said.

Diakon was able to bring the programs to the area thanks in part to funding from the Williamsport-Lycoming Foundation, the Williamsport Area School District and the West Branch Drug and Alcohol Abuse Commission of Williamsport.

Currently, Girls on the Run is being offered at Schick Elementary School in Loyalsock. At the end of March there will be on at Lyter Elementary School in Montoursville and Central Elementary School in South Williamsport.

“We will continue to expand the program without sacrificing quality,” Evans said.

More programs will be offered in a summer camp format after school is out, Russell said. During the summer the program participants meet 8 a.m. to noon every day for one week, as opposed to the the school year’s six week program that meets two days a week.

Training for volunteer staff who would like to help with Girls on Track will be held March 18. For more information call Joan Evans at Diakon Family Life Services, 322-7873.

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