

Girls fitter, more confident outside 'the box'

By Ayesha McAdams-Mahmoud · - Updated 05/06/06 - 1:10 AM

FORT MILL -- Lindy Morris says all girls end up at the same place between the ages of 8 and 13: the girl box.

The box is where conformity, self-doubt and peer pressure linger. But for 12 weeks, nearly 200 girls in York, Chester and Lancaster counties fought against it through a self-esteem-building and running program called Girls on the Run.

They won the battle.

The girls will celebrate the end of another successful Girls on the Run

development session Sunday with the second annual 5K Family Fitness Celebration at the Baxter Village Community Center.

"You can walk, skip or run, whatever you want to do, as long as you're moving forward," said Morris, regional director of Girls on the Run.

The girls -- from 10 different sites and community centers -- met twice a week for 12 weeks to train for the 5K, but they also learned important lessons along the way.

They analyzed female images in magazines and on television, learned ways to combat negative self-image and how to avoid drugs and alcohol. The lessons were meant "to educate and prepare girls for a lifetime of self-respect and healthy living," Morris said.

Nine-year-old Caitlin Montgomery can't wait. This will be the Springfield Elementary School third-grader's first 5K.

"I like the activities they do," Caitlin said. "They teach you to feel good about yourself."

Caitlin's mother, Kiersten Cummings, said her daughter was concerned that running meant athletic competition, which didn't interest her. But she later learned the group was about more than running.

The message

Molly Barker conceived the "girl box" and taught Morris about it. Barker is founder of Girls on the Run, the Charlotte-based nonprofit organization. Since 1996, Barker has spread the program's message to hundreds of schools and communities around the country.

The program came to Fort Mill in 2003 after Morris earned a grant from the Springs Close Foundation and the support of the Leroy Springs Complex. The local sites have put 500 girls through the program so far.

Morris credits the program with bringing her and her 12-year-old daughter closer together.

Becky Faris, a teacher at Richmond Drive Elementary School in Rock Hill and a Girls on the Run coach, said she's seen the program transform lives.

"I had moms and grandmoms coming up to me saying, 'I can see the biggest change in my girl,'" Faris said.

There is a fee to participate, but the program offers scholarships and never turns girls away based on income. Two sessions are offered per



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year, one in the fall and one in the spring.

On Sunday, families will be greeted by a DJ, food from Village Pizza and other local restaurants, and jam-packed goodie bags.

But no awards will be given. Each runner will wear the number "1" to remind them that the journey is more important than where you finish.

WANT TO GO?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What: Girls on the Run 5K Family Fitness Celebration• Where: Baxter Village Community Center, Fort Mill• When: 2 p.m. Sunday• Cost: \$15 to register, \$17 online, \$20 on the day of the run• Details: Register the day of the run at active.com, or pick up a brochure at the Leroy Springs Complex, area YMCAs or Baxter Community Center. Call 802-7210 for information.

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