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Tuesday, September 19, 2006

Putting the Grr in Girl

Path to a healthy lifestyle includes stops for building confidence and self-esteem

By Lisa O'Donnell
JOURNAL REPORTER

Katie Gray Altmann wasn't sure she could run a mile when she signed up for Girls on the Run, a character-building program that was offered at Whitaker Elementary School last spring.

The 12-week program for girls from 8 to 11 years old culminates with a 3.1-mile run.

Katie Gray, a fourth-grader at the time, and 10 other girls met after school twice a week with coaches and other adult volunteers to talk about such issues as body image and self-esteem. They also played games that required movement.

By the time the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure came around in early May, Katie Gray brimmed with confidence.

She remembers standing among the

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thousands of runners and thinking to herself:

"I don't care how long it takes, I'm going to finish this race," Katie Gray recently recalled.

Katie Gray and the rest of the girls in the program achieved a milestone that some adults find challenging - finishing a 3.1-mile race.

More importantly, they learned about values, making healthy choices and the negative ways women and girls are portrayed in the media.

Girls on the Run was developed by Molly Barker, a Charlotte resident and lifelong runner. A counselor and teacher, Barker wanted to help girls before they got trapped in something she calls the "Girl Box."

Girls get drawn into this box when they enter middle school, Barker said. They change their behavior and appearance to satisfy other people. As a result, they may develop eating disorders, become sexually active and lose interest in school.

Girls on the Run is not an exercise program though the girls are physically active during the one-hour sessions. They may play games that require them to skip or run backward. At the end of 12 weeks, the girls should be in good enough shape to complete the program's final goal - finish a 3.1-mile race.

Since the program started with 13 girls in Charlotte in 1996, Girls on the Run has blossomed to include 100 local councils in 31 states. More than 30,000 girls have participated in the program.

Forsyth Medical Center's Sara Lee Center for Women's Health and the Junior League of Winston-Salem brought Girls on the Run to Forsyth County with a pilot program at Whitaker. This fall, they added Brunson and Kimberly Park

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elementary schools.

They would like to introduce Girls on the Run to two more elementary schools each semester, said Paula Evans, the director of the local Girls on the Run program and a community health educator for the women's health center.

Evans said that the program fits into the center's goal of reaching women and girls throughout their life span.

"By reaching girls in their pre-adolescence, we do have a hope of making positive health changes," Evans said. "We know we have an obesity epidemic in this country and we know it is affecting young people. This program will get them moving. I like it because they don't think they're moving. We see a great need to help young people who need to exercise."

Donna Henderson, a professor of counseling at Wake Forest University, said that girls between 8 and 11 are dealing with lots of issues, such as how to fit into a group.

"They're developing their moral awareness and the comparison between what they're learning at home, what they're seeing in the media and then what their friends are doing," Henderson said. "It's a really tough time to try to balance all of that out."

Exercise, she said, can be an important part of a girl's life.

"What we want is moderation and the joy of being active rather than an obsession with body image that is so distorted," Henderson said. "Once that gets started, reversing it is tough."

Girls on the Run costs each girl \$100. But a \$36,000 grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust will cover most of the expenses for girls in equity-plus schools, which are schools where more than 75 percent of the student body is eligible for the free or reduced-cost school lunch program. Scholarship money may also be available for other children who can't afford the fee.

Girls can re-enroll in the program. That's what Katie Gray and her friend, Sarah Peatross, did at Whitaker, where they are in fifth grade.

On a recent afternoon, they ran laps around a courtyard at Whitaker, slapping nametags on other girls in the program.

"It's not all about running," Sarah said. "But you do run."

About 50 girls are in the county's three Girls on the Run program. Their goal is to run 3.1 miles at the YMCA's annual Mistletoe 5K on Dec. 2. They will be lined up with an adult, often a parent, who will serve as their running buddy.

"Our biggest problem in the spring was parents who didn't realize how fit their girls were," Evans said. "And they had difficulty keeping up. That's a great

problem to have."

- Lisa O'Donnell can be reached at 727-7420 or at lo'donnell@wsjournal.com.
- If you would like to volunteer with Girls on the Run or learn more about it, call Paula Evans at 718-5247.

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