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Girls on the Run Sangster Elementary joins the movement.

By Sara Lepley/Editor of WSHS Newspaper
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The elementary and middle school-aged girls are about to do something that would challenge most adults — run a 5K, on an early Sunday morning to boot. Yet they are dancing and giggling in anticipation, because they are all ready to achieve their goals.

Girls on the Run, or GOTR, is a 10-week program that interlaces positive self-image and goal-setting with running. Every practice the girls have a lesson where they learn about understanding themselves, building healthy relationships, and giving back to the community. Then they go for a run and enjoy a healthy snack. At the end of the season, they participate in a semi-annual 5K race with their "running buddy" who might be a family member or older friend.

MORE THAN 350,000 girls in the United States and Canada, and almost 30,000 girls in Northern Virginia, have participated over the past 10 years.

This year the Northern Virginia 5K event was moved to Jiffy Lube Live in order to accommodate the growing number of participants. Almost 7,000 runners assembled at the start line, as 3,000 well-wishers, designated at different points of the 3.1 mile course in Bristow, Va., cheered them along.

The strong commitment to healthy living, physical activity, and giving back GOTR inspires, extends both on and off the track. The theme for one of Sangster Elementary School's runners, Alyssa Maryanopolis's 10th birthday party included a 1.7 mile fun run dubbed "the double-digit run," homemade medals and "Lissy-aide" in honor of the birthday girl. The real magic, however, was in the gifts.

"[The girls] were asked to consider donating to GOTR in lieu of a gift," said mother Joyce Maryanopolis.

It was Alyssa's older sister, 13-year-old Alexandra, who planned the party and decided to use it as a way to raise money for GOTR.

"[Alyssa's] made so many close friends who she can always trust...through this program," said Alexandra. "I don't think any girl should have this chance taken away from them because of financial issues."

Together, the girls raised \$75. Just \$70 enables one girl whose family receives Free and Reduced Lunch at school to participate in Girls on the Run.

"Our curriculum benefits all girls, and our program is one of inclusion and acceptance," said Catherine Keightley, Executive Director of Girls on the Run of Northern Virginia. "Since our objective is to serve every girl who is interested in participating in Girls on the Run, we strive to provide financial support to families with financial need through individual donations and corporate sponsorships."

Alyssa's family's desire to give back to the community is shared with her teammates and the GOTR program. Every year, the different GOTR teams participate in community service projects. This year, however, they banded together in this season's food drive, Girls on the Run Gives Back. The food drive raised more than 3,000 pounds of food for ACTS (Action in the Community Through Service.) Additionally, the girls understand how important money-raising for GOTR is so that everyone who wants to participate has the chance to do so. Sangster runner Danielle believes it is important to help girls afford GOTR "so they can experience the fun of a 5K."

The positive impact of GOTR transcends just running. By instilling a healthy self-esteem at an early age and creating a great friend-making avenue, GOTR can be especially helpful for girls who may have fewer opportunities due to financial need. "[Everyone] deserves all these friends," said Sangster athlete, Molly.

Elementary school can be a breeding ground for mean girls, peer-pressure and the seemingly endless need to fit in. At their practices, however, the girls are able to build healthy friendships and learn how to appreciate themselves and others.

"It's the perfect time for girls to hear positive feedback in their lives and feel good about themselves," said Sangster Coach Allison Latif, who is also a parent on the team.

GOTR SHIFTS THE FOCUS from being thin to being healthy, which in turn avoids problems such as obesity and diabetes. It helps develop a healthy relationship with running. Instead of defining exercise as a way to lose weight, as many television ads and magazines seem to promote, the girls focus on how running makes them feel happy and good about themselves.

"I never heard Alyssa say that running calms her down before [Alyssa's interview.]" said Maryanopolis. "I like that she recognizes that that is what exercise does for her."

As the girls pass through the finish line, some openly rejoice while some just smile, but they are all visibly proud of themselves and everything they have accomplished. They are aware not only of how they have become physically stronger, but also emotionally stronger. For them, GOTR not only helps develop a commitment to physical activity and life skills, but is a lot of fun.

"You learn a lot of life lessons, play a lot of games and learn about running," said Molly.



David Brooks Photography
Girls on the Run (GOTR) jump on the starting line on Nov. 27.



David Brooks Photography
Girls on the Run (GOTR) at the starting line on Nov. 27.

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