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BY LERIN MADOLE

YWCA program gets girls on track

And they're off! YWCA Tulsa has pulled the trigger on the second spring season for their Girls on the Run program. In the 10-week program, girls from the third through eighth grades meet twice weekly to train and to work toward a big 5k run finale. Along the way, they learn about positive self-image, becoming a role model, recognizing and combating negativity, and becoming a vocal part of their community.

The program has two different curriculums: Girls on the Run (GOTR) is the curriculum designed for girls in third through fifth grades, and Girls on Track (GOT) is designed for grades six through eight. Many girls repeat the program, move up from GOTR to GOT, or go on to become Junior Coaches and role models for girls in the program.

Melissa Baker, program manager for GOTR, explained that the program's structure is divided into three sections. The first teaches the girls about positive self-image. That then carries over into a discussion about becoming a strong and positive role model. It also teaches about recognizing bullying and combatting negativity. "We talk about how we all have emotions and there's no good or bad about it," she said. "There's just comfortable and uncomfortable, and it's ok to have those feelings and express them constructively."



Health and Wellness Director at the Tulsa YWCA, Katie Gill Miller, went on to say, "They develop great group support and work through those challenges together."

Finally, the program teaches about being part of the community and having a voice. "They develop their own sense of self as they work toward the 5k in the final weeks of the course, and really feel empowered at the end," Melissa said.

Melissa remembered one particular fifth grader at Gilcrease last year who became noticeably stronger and more sure of herself by the program's end. In the beginning she was very shy and had difficulty making eye contact. When asked how she felt after the practice 5k in preparation for

the final event, she said, "Coach Melissa, I feel brave and confident!" Hanna in the sixth grade last year said, "This program makes me feel strong and helps me know I can do whatever I want." These are not uncommon attitudes for girls exiting the program, Katie added. "It's amazing to watch them grow within themselves and as a group."

The program is 100 percent volunteer based through the Tulsa YWCA. There are opportunities for parents and community members to volunteer on an on-going basis as head or assistant coaches, or for one-day events and fundraisers as running buddies or organizers. While there are registration fees for the girls to be part of GOTR, half of the girls receive scholarships from

local community partners and donations to the program. Katie said that "The Tulsa Shock has been amazing. They've helped by investing in the program, as well as finding investors."

"Six of our coaches are from the Tulsa Shock," Melissa said, "and they make great role models as well."

There's a broad spectrum of physical ability for the girls and for the volunteers, Melissa said. "It isn't just about running, it's about moving forward." The program accommodates all levels of physical ability. Anyone with interest is encouraged to get involved. "And we need volunteers!" she added emphatically. The first two years have seen growth from 26 girls in the first season to 76 in the second. Now they're looking at having 110 girls for the spring season and need volunteers to help support the program's growth.

Kasey Vint described her experience as a coach in the program.

"I love coaching Girls on the Run because I see teammates gain a new sense of self-awareness, empowerment, and personal strength with each lesson," she said.

Aimee Cooper said of her coaching experience, "I thought it would be a great way to give back to the Tulsa community in a fun and healthy way. What I

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didn't realize was how much of an impact I had on the girls' lives and the impact they would have on mine."

The pride in the voices of the girls and their coaches is audible. Katie Gill Miller and Melissa Baker both exude positivity and excitement when talking about Girls on the Run. They inspire confidence and a desire for involvement in anyone who shows an interest. Parents who wish to get involved or bring the program to their daughters' schools can visit the GOTR website to learn more about the program and find contact information there (www.ywcatulsa.org/pages/gotr_overview/). Anyone who wishes to volunteer can visit the program's volunteer page at www.ywcatulsa.org/pages/volunteer_opportunities/. Also see the GOTR Facebook page at www.facebook.com/GirlsOnTheRunYwcaTulsaTulsaCounty.

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