

Girls on the Run program expands to Belfair to help youth build confidence

By ARLA SHEPHARD
MASON COUNTY LIFE

As a mother of a 9-year-old girl, Katie Patti has started to see some behaviors in her daughter and among her daughter's friends that worry her.

"My daughter is confident and sassy, but just the other day I saw this other side sneak in," Patti said. "Questions like, 'Do I look OK?' 'Will you be my friend?' come up. I want her to be confident and unique and inspired. I want to give these girls something they can use."

Enter Girls on the Run West Sound, an organization that launched last year in Kitsap County that works with third- through fifth-grade girls to build confidence, learn positive behaviors and give back to the community, all while training to run a non-competitive 5K.

The West Sound chapter of the national group also includes Gig Harbor and Mason County, and this month launches for the first time in Belfair at Sand Hill Elementary, thanks to Patti's efforts.

"I know the need is here," said Patti, who once coached cheer at the high school. "I wish many of the girls I'd worked with had gone through this program. It gives girls the tools to manage things like gossiping and bullying. There's a huge need and you'll find it anywhere."

For North Mason girls, the cost to enter the 10-week program is \$30,

thanks to a sponsorship from the Bruce Titus Auto Group in Olympia.

The program starts March 24 and meets twice a week, 4-5:30 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday, at Sand Hill Elementary.

Coaches work with a team of about 15 girls on a curriculum that teaches them to value themselves, build positive relationships and understand their place in the community, said Rachel Bearbower, executive director of Girls on the Run West Sound.

"It's all about empowering girls and inspiring them to be who they are," she said. "It's about teaching them to really value their uniqueness and really understand their values."

Bearbower grew up in Bremerton, but discovered Girls on the Run when she lived in Boston and became a coach for a local chapter there.

When she returned to the area in 2012, she resolved to start a local chapter.

After a year and a half of building the program, Bearbower launched Girls on the Run of West Sound's first season in March 2014, with 92 girls from North Kitsap, Central Kitsap and Gig Harbor taking part.

A second season took place from September through December with 93 girls, and in this third season, the program has grown to include Port Orchard and North Mason.

"We started in Kitsap, but after researching what happened in other areas, I knew I'd have a greater impact if I incorporated more

areas early on," Bearbower said. "I didn't want Mason County to go through all that work for their own chapter later when I could include them now."

Patti learned about the program through a former co-worker at Harrison Hospital, who served on the board of Girls on the Run West Sound when it started.

"I thought it was something we needed in Mason County," said Patti, now a board member. "A lot of our girls are staying in the community, starting families and working. This is an opportunity to give our girls, who are going to be the next community leaders, an extra boost."

Last month, Patti and Bearbower approached Sand Hill Elementary Principal Kristen Sheridan, who then sought approval to start the program from Superintendent Dana Rosenbach.

Within a week, the two women received the go-ahead from the two female administrators.

"I've been doing this for two years and have not once come across someone who was ambivalent about this," Bearbower said. "Everyone understands its impact. It's a program that I think we all can relate to. We've all had days of insecurity. We've all had that



PHOTO BY ARLA SHEPHARD

Girls on the Run WestSound executive director Rachel Bearbower, left, and board member Katie Patti are bringing the non-competitive running program to Belfair. The 10-week program teaches third- through fifth-grade girls confidence-building skills while training for a 5K.

lack of confidence."

More kids are seeing their parents become active and participate in runs, Bearbower added, which gets them excited to take part in a healthy activity.

The cumulative 5K run — not race, to discourage the girls from being competitive with one another — takes place at 9 a.m., Saturday, June 6, at the Clear Creek trail in Silverdale. The girls also pick a community service project each season.

Girls can run, walk, crawl, cartwheel or whatever else they'd like to do to move forward toward the finish line, Bearbower

said.

"It is a running program, but it's so much more," she said. "It's about getting them to be proud of who they are."

To register for the program or for more informa-

tion, including how to become a coach or donate, email rachel.bearbower@girlsontherun.org, call 621-4855 or visit www.girlsontherunwestsound.org or www.facebook.com/GOTRWS.


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