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Running toward a better future: After-school program helps girls build confidence

By Amy Roe
Journal Reporter

It's a snowy afternoon, but inside The Old Schoolhouse Community Center in Redmond, 10-year-old Elyssa Shoup is happily slapping her bare feet against the gym floor.

Her cheeks are as pink as her coordinated shirt and pants, and when she rounds the corner and catches her mother's eye, she smiles.

You might say Elyssa is running, but her mom, Mimi Johnson, sees her working another muscle: confidence. She figures it will make Elyssa strong enough to resist peer pressure when she's older.

"If they've got confidence you can feel comfortable that they'll make good decisions," said Johnson, a sports medicine doctor.

That's the philosophy behind Girls on the Run, a 12-week after-school program designed to prevent the pitfalls adolescent girls face — substance abuse, eating disorders and the like — by boosting their self-esteem through running activities and life-skills lessons.

At that age, "They're kind of on the edge," said Ana Maria King, director of the Puget Sound chapter of Girls on the Run. "They've got one foot in the teenage world and one foot in the kid world."

On Saturday, the girls will put both feet forward in an "adult" 5k, the Diva Dash in Seward Park, as part of their graduation from the program.

Proceeds from the non-competitive, females-only event will be donated to fund scholarships for Girls on the Run of Puget Sound, which was founded in 2002 and has served about 350 girls. The program costs \$150, but about 75 percent of all participants receive a scholarship, King said.

It's not a typical running regimen. There are no whistles or clipboards. Girls pick their own pace, and build their endurance by playing games mixed with lessons on topics like self-respect, friendship and substance abuse.

Every girl is paired with an adult volunteer running buddy, who coaxes and cajoles her charge to keep moving, whether by running, skipping or walking to the finish.

Johnson said Elyssa loves the attention.

"She feels very special to have that one person that's just hers. What kid her age wouldn't like an adult just to themselves?"

For the adults involved, Girls On the Run offers some unexpected lessons.

Catrena Sullivan of Kirkland said coaching the Redmond program has reminded her of the importance of modeling good body image to her 8-year-old daughter, Kiera.

"It makes me think a lot more about the messages I'm sending to her about myself," Sullivan said of the Girls on the Run curriculum. "I think it's good for me to hear it, too."

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