



Program aims to boost confidence, healthy habits

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BENTONVILLE — Women and girls lined up on the street in front of the Boys and Girls Club in Bentonville Saturday morning, facing a chilly 34 degrees with little more than ear muffs, head bands, sweatshirts and gloves.

For some, the “Chicks” - n-Chili 5 K race for girls and women was a chance to test their speed or run with family and friends, but for several young girls, it marked the end of a 12-week program building confidence and teaching healthy living.

Melissa Upton of Rogers said the Girls on the Run program taught her oldest daughter, a fifth-grade student at Mathias Elementary School, that she doesn't have to be skinny to be healthy.

“They've actually gotten a lot better with their self-confidence,” said Upton, who has two children in the program.

Kari Kelly of Bentonville said her daughter, Kaitlin, could run three laps when she joined Girls on the Run this fall and has boosted that to 12 laps.

“I think her determination has really improved,” Kelly said of her 8-year-old.

But the program goes beyond improving physical health, said Debra Senser, one of three codirectors of the local chapter. Senser said the girls learn how to handle a bully, be a good community member and be true to their word.

Senser said 40 girls ages 8 to 11 are in the program, which could expand if more coaches sign up to lead the lessons, exercises and stretches. Three groups meet at the McKinney Unit of the Boys and Girls Club and two meet at Mathias Elementary School for a 12-week, twice-weekly program in the spring and fall. A second program for 12- to 15-year-old girls, called Girls on Track, delves into more serious topics.

Senser said the programs aim to prevent eating disorders, alcohol and drug use, and teach the girls self esteem and independence.

Running and walking with the girls from Girls on the Run, around the Bentonville Square and back to the Boys and Girls Club HLM Unit on Leopard Lane, were running buddies — one for each girl — and other girls and women interested in running.

Mary Genova, a seventhgrade cross-country runner at Washington Junior High School, ran her second “Chicks” -n-Chili race with teammate Kelsey Wheelhouse.

Rachel Hardgrave, 11, of Fayetteville was first to cross the finish line with a time of 19:46.

Christina Peterson of Lowell and her daughter Carrie Adcock of Fayetteville ran the 5 K race together as they have several other charity races this year.

“ It’s something for her and I to do together, ” Adcock said.

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