

Girls On The Run

Putting The Fun In Running

Liz DeCarlo
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When Kelly O'Brien coaches her girls' running team in Chicago, she spends as much time teaching the girls about healthy living and self-respect as she does about running. A practice session might include running laps and talking about how to handle gossip.

That's the point of Girls on the Run, a national organization with chapters in Chicago and suburban schools. The organization uses running to change the way girls ages 8 to 12 see themselves by combining training for a 5K (3.1 mile) run/walk with lessons to inspire self-respect and healthy living, says O'Brien, executive director of Girls on the Run-Chicago and a coach at Hawthorne Elementary School in Chicago.



Photo courtesy of Kelly O'Brien
Members of Girls on the Run, a program that teaches healthy living and self-respect, wear tiaras when they run.

"We're reaching out to girls at an age where I still believe we can make a difference," says Wendy Wagoner, a board member of the group and coach at the University of Chicago Laboratory School in Hyde Park.

At Ariel Community Academy in Chicago, third-grader Breyana Wheaton can't wait for the twice-a-week practice sessions, says her mom Anika Wheaton.

"If there are days they can't go outside, then they do bonding activities, like making drawings or tracings of each other," says Wheaton. "They do things that help them bond as a team and get to know the girl, or eventually woman, in you."

The culmination of the Girls on the Run training sessions is the WonderGirl 5K fun run on June 3. (It's called a fun run because, unlike a race, there are no timers, winners or losers.)

Each girl runs wearing a tiara and paired with a Wonder Buddy, who could be a mom, dad, teacher or any other important adult in her life. Others—both male and female—are eligible to run as well.

"Breyana is so excited. She can't wait for me to run along with her," says Wheaton, who has been working on her endurance so she can keep up with her daughter.

Sarah Hecht, 10, of Riverside is running the race with her dad for the second year. Last year Sarah's mom, Jane Hecht, made signs and followed the route to cheer on the team. "They really had great fun," says Hecht. "And it was just a thrill to see how many girls were in the event."

The race begins at 9 a.m. June 3 at 4400 N. Lake Shore Drive. Registration is \$35, \$20 ages 13 and under on race day; \$25, \$10 in advance. The race is limited to the first 2,500 who sign up. Register at www.gotrchicago.com or by calling (773) 296-4519. The day will include free events before and after the race.

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