

Girls on the Run shows positive results

I've written a lot about the need for opportunities in Rutland County for girls and women to become empowered, and I always have my eye out for new ones.

I recently heard about Girls on the Run, an organization that aims to inspire girls to be joyful, healthy and confident using a fun curriculum that integrates running. The 12-week after-school program is for third- through eighth-grade girls. It helps them develop self-esteem, a positive body image, healthy habits and strategies for dealing with life's challenges.

Part of the idea is to keep girls from thinking they need to conform to certain societally imposed standards in order to be happy and successful. Evidence-based evaluations of the program have shown a significant improvement in the girls' body image, eating attitudes and self-esteem as a result of the program.

The Rutland area teams held their walk/run event May 31 at the fairgrounds. The turnout was impressive — more than 800 girls who were program participants and 600 members of the community. Girls from the Rutland area have been involved in the program for more than 10 years, but the first Rutland 5K happened last year. Before that, the girls from this area participated in either the Brattleboro or Essex events.

In a unique twist, the girls can choose to walk, run, skip, jump or even dance their way along the route

and across the finish line. Instead of being competitive, the focus is on setting and reaching goals, team building, maintaining a positive attitude and building strong, supportive relationships.

The event also provides girls an opportunity to raise money to provide scholarships for those who otherwise could not afford to participate in the program. Last year, more than \$70,000 was raised statewide to help participants afford the program and to award small scholarships to several graduating seniors who were previous program participants.

Leading up to the 5K event, the teams of eight to 15 girls meet twice weekly to gain a better understanding of who they are and what's important to them. They also explore how they can positively connect with and shape the world around them. Each team is required to create and execute a local community service project that empowers them to make a difference.

When asked about the outcomes the organization has seen in Rutland, executive director Nancy Heydinger was very enthusiastic. "We love Rutland and are so amazed at how popular the program is with families in the area. This year we had over 800 girls participating, and every one learned important skills that will help them grow up to be strong, healthy, confident, compassionate young women. It's all about honoring and celebrating their individual uniqueness."

Regarding the support that Girls



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PHOTO BY JOSH HUMMEL

Girls on the Run participants jubilantly cross the finish line at the Rutland 5K event.

on the Run has received from the Rutland community, Heydinger was equally positive. "Last year Governor Shumlin and Mayor Louras spoke at the inaugural 5K," she reflected, "and this year Superintendent Mary Moran said some wonderfully inspiring words to the girls before the 5K began. She also served as our honorary 5K starter and cheered the girls on at the finish line with me. We're very grateful to have so much support from the school district, local businesses, families and Rutland residents overall. We can't wait to come back next year!"

Parents are encouraged to get involved with Girls on the Run. Along with helping their child register, providing transportation and just plain

being supportive, parents can also choose to volunteer as coaches for the teams.

There are more than 140 program sites in Vermont. To find one near you, visit the Girls on the Run website at www.girlsontherunvermont.org or call 246-1476. With only two volunteer coaches, you can start a new team in your area if one does not exist. Coach training happens in January and February, and the program starts up again in March 2015. Girls on the Run also encourages businesses to sponsor this valuable programming.

Elsie Gilmore is the founder of Urban Mayhem Project, the catalyst for the Rutland Uprising campaign (www.urbanmayhemproject.com).