

AZ Giving: Steps to Self-Confidence

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In a world of airbrushing and Photoshop, it's near impossible for young girls to grow up with positive self-images, but one organization is helping girls gain self-confidence one mile at a time.



Girls on the Run, an international nonprofit organization dedicated to helping young girls gain self-respect and make healthy life choices, opened its Maricopa County council in 2004 (as well as a chapter in Pinal County this year) and has been encouraging young girls ever since. Meagan Kukowski, executive director of Girls on the Run of Maricopa County, says one of the most rewarding aspects of the program is "seeing the impact not only on the lives of the girls we serve, but also on their families and on the hundreds of volunteers who make our mission possible."

The Girls on the Run program centers around girls from third to eighth grade training together in an interactive curriculum and running program that addresses the girls' physical, emotional, mental and social well-being. The girls are provided with tools during the 24-course program to make positive decisions and to avoid risky adolescent behaviors, all while training to run a 5K group race.

Kukowski has seen the positive impact the program has on girls of all ages, from the participants to the volunteers, but there is one little girl who stands out in her mind. "I first got involved with Girls on the Run as a volunteer coach. In my first season, there was a girl on my team who was clearly not a member of the popular crowd," Kukowski says. "[Megan] was self-conscious, oftentimes sat by herself, said and did awkward things. She was a character."

Working through the program in teams and practicing the importance of giving back to the community gave Megan the confidence to give her all in the final 5K run with her peers. "I ran with Megan as her Running Buddy. Her entire family came to see her complete this race, and her nerves were clear. As a pair, we quickly fell to the back of the pack. When Megan got tired, we skipped or sang, and when we passed people cheering on the sidelines, Megan glowed," Kukowski says. As the two listened to cheers and posed for pictures after finishing, Megan whispered something to Kukowski that she won't soon forget: "I am like a bolt of lightning."

Kukowski says she's heard positive feedback from mothers who now implement healthier diets in their households, grandparents who are proud of how comfortable and self-assured the girls became and volunteers who wish the program was around during their own adolescence. Sticking to their mission to inspire girls to be joyful, healthy and confident, Kukowski says Girls on the Run "[hopes] that girls leave [the] program with a lifelong self-confidence and the tools to make positive decisions, empowered to boldly pursue their dreams."

TO LEARN MORE

Girls on the Run of Maricopa County

www.gotrmc.org.