

"The biggest barrier I've had to overcome is my own self-doubt," says Barker, with her son, Hank, and daughter, Helen.



LEADER OF THE PACK • Molly Barker, Girls on the Run

As a teenager, Barker fell into what she calls the girl box. "I was obsessed with being the popular girl, or the pretty girl, or the one with the boyfriends," she says. By the time she was 15, only two things helped her forget her insecurities: running and drinking. After college she spent five years teaching high school chemistry. Then she got offtrack.

Running on empty: "In my early 30s, I finished the Ironman triathlon in Charlotte, North Carolina. You'd have thought I was this topnotch athlete, but there was a dark, frustrated woman lost inside. My drinking had escalated, and on July 6, 1993, I made a desperate phone call to

my sister, threatening to disappear, and she said, 'Why don't you sleep on it?' The next day, at sunset, I went for a run. I had this epiphany: *You're perfect just the way you are*, and I realized that's how all women should feel."

Hearts and minds: "I've never met a third-grader who doesn't think she's all that. By high school, though, girls are worried about how people judge them. I decided to try to reach young women before they entered the girl box, so in 1996 I started Girls on the Run with 13 kids. I'd just had my son, and while he was sleeping, I would write out my ideas for workouts. The original girls told their friends, so then we had 26.

Runner's World did a piece on us in 1998, and I started to get calls from all over. Now we have 119 chapters across the United States and Canada, and we've worked with approximately 50,000 girls. Our chapters follow the same curriculum: The girls meet twice a week for 12 weeks with volunteer coaches. We marry running games with life-skill lessons. It gives girls the tools to stand up for themselves."

Finish strong: "I never intended for this to be my career. I thought it was a hobby, but as it began to grow, I had no doubt that I was created to do this—to make every girl realize the glorious potential she has within her." photographs by Jennifer rocholl