

Program teaches self-esteem

BY AMY LAZAR
Staff Writer

Sweater sleeves poked out from under white Girls on the Run T-shirts.

Some wore hats, some had gloves and all wore running shoes.

"This is your one-minute warning, so make sure your shoes are tied," a voice called over a megaphone.

Steamy breath rose above the 20 girls, excitedly jumping around at the starting line of a three-kilometre run at Bindertwine Park in Kleinburg, waiting for the flag to drop,

Becky Wieschkowski was at the front of the pack and one of the first girls to cross the finish line.

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"We have so much fun and if you like to run, you should join," said the nine-year-old member of Girls on the Run York Region & GTA chapter.

There are only four chapters across Canada, but in 2004, more than 15,000 girls across North America met twice a week to run, laugh and learn.

Becky is a student at Kleinburg Public School,

where a mother, Rina De Donato, has started the program.

"It's an interactive life skills program," said Ms De Donato, who teaches the girls how to run, stay healthy and stay out of the "girl box".

The girl box is a cookie-cutter image of what young girls evaluate themselves against, Ms De Donato explained.

"There are media messages and schoolyard messages telling girls what is acceptable in society and they move away from their core values to try and fit in," she said.

The program for girls in Grade 3 to 5 and another division called Girls on Track for Grade 6 to 8, which kicks off in March, gives them tools to reject pressure and be happy in their own skin.

To become a director, Ms De Donato had to submit to a lengthy application process including a demographic analysis of York Region, personal fitness training and a session in the United States.

"I read about it in my runners magazine and, when I saw the details online, it was instantaneous that I knew this was something I needed to do," she said.

The non-profit, after-school program runs twice weekly for 10 weeks. The \$129 participation fee covers teaching time, activities, a T-shirt, water bottle, race bag, literature and awards

John and Susan Antunes' daughter, Kristen, wanted to join after learning about the program from Ms De Donato at a school assembly.

"Originally I wasn't overly excited, but when we saw the curriculum, we thought it was a good program," Mr. Antunes said.

"We didn't hesitate to sign her up because the content is invaluable for Kristen."

For more information about Girls on the Run, call Rina De Donato 905 893 3808.



STAFF PHOTO/AMY LAZAR

Approximately 20 members of the Girls on the Run program take part in a three kilometre run in Bindertwine Park in Kleinburg Saturday. It's one of four Canadian chapters in the organization, which uses distance running to teach life skills