

# Program tackles youth image obsession

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In a world where music videos showcase shapely abdominals, movies present perfect faces, and glamour magazine stress toned thighs, popular culture implies image is everything.

For many, especially young women, it's a dog-eat-dog society, and classic values are replaced by a preoccupation with presentation.

This is a trend Rina De Donato has sought to address with the *Girls on the Run* (GOTR) program.

It's a non-profit organization dedicated to helping girls stay out of what she calls the "girl box."

"When girls are bombarded by these images daily, they tend to have low self-esteem, they change their physical appearance, they change their attitude,

and they tend to move away from their true values," De Donato says. "They're in the girl box."

It's a phenomenon she said is evident as early as Grade 3 for some girls.

De Donato is the Council Director for GOTR York Region and GTA. She runs an after school program which uses experiential learning and training for a three and five kilometre race/walk with curricula designed to promote good choices for a lifetime of self respect and healthy living.

"Mass media tend to instill messages in these young girls that they aren't making the cut, so we have developed a system that helps them make informed decisions," De Donato says.

On Saturday, June 11, participating GOTR students from Grades 3 to 8 of Kleinburg Public School

will culminate their eight weeks of training with the Spring 2005 three and five kilometre run as the program's finale celebration.

GOTR was created in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1996 by four-time Hawaii Iron man triathlete Molly Baker. There are now more than 104 GOTR Councils in North America, but GOTR York Region and GTA is only one of three GOTR Councils in Canada. Moreover, right now, GOTR is limited solely to Kleinburg Public School.

This will change in September when Saint Catherine of Siena, Maple Leaf Public School, and Deer Park Public School come on board for the local chapter of the program.

"We're looking to expand all throughout the York Region and eventually the GTA." De Donato said.

Girls get involved by their own volition. De Donato will visit the participating schools to make formal presentations on the program. It's up to interested girls from there who discuss it with their parents and decide whether the after school program is something they would like to join.

For 10 weeks during the program, which has both a Spring and a Fall session, the girls meet twice a week at 3:15 p.m. at the school to engage in group activities which promote a sense of identity, a healthy body image, self acceptance, media awareness, and an understanding of what it means to be part of a community and a team.

The program not only prepares the girls for the run. It attempts to prepare them for a lifetime of self-respect and healthy living.

"The acceptance of the Girls on the Run program at Kleinburg Public School has been overwhelming and has led to the launch of the Girls on Track program, which focuses on girls in Grades six to eight," De Donato said. "These girls have worked very hard towards their personal goals and I'm proud of each and every one of them."

She said some of the progress is tangible within weeks.

"I've seen a significant response. Some girls begin this program feeling intimidated speaking before a crowd, so what we do is share feel-good stories between one another," De Donato said. "By the third and fourth weeks, everyone is speaking confidently in front of one another and sharing stories and laughing

and having fun while doing it."

The event will carry the façade of a race, but it is irrelevant who wins or loses.

"We're not stressing any sort of competitive element here," said De Donato.

The girls are already a success. They were asked before the race to pick a local charity and raise pledges for the race. They chose to support the Vita Nova Rehabilitation Centre and they managed to raise more than \$1,200.

"For twenty-three girls, that's quite amazing," De Donato said.

The race kicks-off at 10 a.m. at Bindertwine park in Kleinburg. It is followed by a cheque presentation, awards, and a celebration.

The program resumes again on an expanded basis in the Fall.