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## Running program reminds girls "it's cool to be yourself"



Written by Tessie Sanci

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Rina De Donato's favourite word might be "phenomenal", seeing as she uses it frequently. It is easy to understand why if one is aware of the work that she and her family are devoted to. De Donato is the council director for the York Region and Greater Toronto Area branch of Girls on the Run (GOTR).

GOTR is a non-profit organization determined to help young girls grow in self-confidence and understand that anything is possible with effort and determination. It is a nine week curriculum-based program that ends with a five kilometer run. It was developed in North Carolina in the mid-nineties by Molly Barker and has grown to include over 150 councils throughout North America. Of these, only two are in Canada.

The program automatically appealed to De Donato, a mother of two young girls and a runner. She sees running as a solitary activity that people can do without fear of judgment. Both she and her husband knew there was a need for this program and that she was meant to bring it to the GTA.

De Donato launched her first GOTR program with Kleinburg Public School in 2004 with the participation of twenty-one girls. This year, the program has grown to over 400 girls with fifteen participating schools throughout York Region and North York.

GOTR is designed for two age groups. The original Girls on the Run program is targeted towards girls between the ages of eight and eleven years old while the participants for Girls on Track are between the ages of twelve and fourteen years old. The program involves lessons and discussions on topics such as gossip, substance abuse, eating disorders, and being positive, which De Donato describes as a huge issue.

Both groups are taught by trained coaches who are simultaneously preparing the girls for the physical challenge of a 5K non-competitive run, called the "It's Cool to be Me" run. The name of the run comes from a question that De Donato asks every girl: "Wouldn't it be amazing to wake up every morning and say 'It's cool to be me'?"



Participants in Girls on the Run, a non-profit program designed to help young girls build self-confidence.

For that to happen, the girls need to be free of the "girl box". De Donato explains, "That's a place where girls feel that everybody is looking at their outside, how they look, how they dress, how they act, and they don't really see what's on the inside. They don't value what's on the inside. Our job is to help you get out of the box if you're there and help you stay out of the box."

Over the last three years, De Donato has realized that the pressures young people face are not static. One of the components that she has implemented through her summer camp program is the discussion of internet safety. With instant messaging, online social networking, and the lack of privacy that this affords, young people are more exposed than ever before - a fact that worries many parents. This is why York Regional Police assist De Donato by conducting their "Be Net Aware" presentation.

Through GOTR, young girls are encouraged to believe in themselves as individuals but it is also a journey to understand the importance of community.

Every session of GOTR involves a project entitled "Run for a Reason" in which the organization partners with a charity. The girls use their practice 5K to collect pledges from family and friends, with one hundred per cent of the proceeds going to the charity.

The project also involves guest speakers from the charity who help the girls understand why their contributions are important. Last year's charity was ChildFind Ontario, who not only sent representatives to speak to the girls but also streetproofed them. This involved discussing what a child would do in a dangerous situation and providing them with tools to prevent such situations. GOTR was very proud to present a cheque for \$12,000 to the organization. Other charities that have benefited from the generosity of GOTR are Free the Children, Habitat for Humanity York Region, Hospice Vaughan, and Vita Nova.

The pride and knowledge the girls take from this program is indicative of its success. For De Donato, this culminates in the faces of the girls as they cross the finish line. She recalls their first 5K run, saying, "Watching their faces when they came across the finish line was probably the most phenomenal return and heartfelt moment. Every single finish line, I just end up bawling. It's just so emotional. One of the girls came through the finish line and she started crying because she had done what she had never dreamed of. It was pretty incredible for me to see that."

The success of the program also involves the ability to raise funds. While GOTR does charge a fee for each participant to help cover lessons and materials, the program requires further funds. This year, De Donato decided to bring a component of the American GOTR to her council in the form of Team Tiara. Team Tiara is the fundraising leg of GOTR. Though very successful in the United States, De Donato hesitated in bringing it here because of the proliferation of causes already available.

Would anyone without a daughter understand and want to support this particular cause?

The answer is yes. Team Tiara, in its first year, consisted of fifteen women and one man who collected pledges to run in the 2007 Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront 5K and Half-Marathon. However, Team Tiara was not just about running for one day. The group went through a curriculum very similar to GOTR but targeted for older individuals. With the help of Integrity Fitness, De Donato was able to set up a non-threatening, non-competitive training and learning program for her adult runners. In terms of fundraising, they were able to raise approximately \$3200. This will go directly to the GOTR scholarship program, which benefits young girls in the community that would like to participate but are unable to afford the program. However, this year's Team Tiara also drew personal benefits, including a greater ability to realize their own potential, allowing the adults to learn what the GOTR girls have been learning for the last three years.

It is easy to see why a program like this would be successful with people of all ages. The growing media obsession with celebrity culture is communicating a world that very few people can relate to, which is why the GOTR curriculum includes teaching the girls the importance of critiquing the media and its messages.

With programs like GOTR and positive publicity campaigns such as those by Dove, is it possible that the tide is turning in terms of realistic role models for young people? De Donato responds, "I would like to hope that this is something that people are going to embrace. The Doves of the world are phenomenal and they make it possible for women to believe in themselves. However, our younger generation is not looking at Dove as a role model. When we can have positive role modeling in the music industry, in pop culture, and the mainstream media, that will play a significant role on how a girl really sees herself and what her role models are."

Until then, Girls on the Run will be here to make sure that girls throughout the region are waking up, knowing that it is very cool to be them.