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Feature Writing Local Feature

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Almost twenty years ago, Kathy Jensen was looking for an after-school activity for her daughter. That's how she discovered Girls on the Run (GOTR) a local non-profit after-school program that helps girls through fitness exercises but also through character building and training sessions. After seeing how powerful the organization was for her daughter, Jensen decided to get more involved with the organization herself and became a coach.

Now, a few years later, Jensen is the community resource manager of the organization. It was almost the perfect marriage for Jensen, who's job shares the same passion for running as young people. That's how she became involved with the Organization. "I also love to be able to inspire young people and it is kind of how I landed in this role because I thought fitness could also inspire young people as well as it did to me," said Jensen.

GOTR is an after-school program designed to inspire girls of all abilities to recognize and embrace their inner strength. The non-profit organization emphasizes the important connection between physical and emotional health. GOTR was created to inspire girls to be joyful, healthy, and confident through fitness events that empower girls by running. At GOTR, they believe every girl

deserves a place to grow, connect and shine, is inherently full of power and potential. Right now, it is up to 100 teams a season, 14000 girls, they can hardly keep up with the growing.

In terms of the girls, the organization offers two different programs. One of them is “Girls on the Run”, which is for 3rd to 5th-grade girls. It kind of targets issues that girls of that age face. The other program, which involves girls from 6th to 8th grades, called “Heart and Soul” targets issues that girls face as pre-teens, things like social media, self-esteem... which is the biggest difference between the two curricula.

The organization also organize an annual summer camp called “Camp GOTR” open to all age girls. This program doesn’t have the fitness component, which means not running strictly, even though, they play games which require movement. It does have the social and emotional component. It is a six-day program, where the girls will build, create, write, discuss, connect, and laugh all while participating in games and activities that will leave them feeling confident and appreciated by their teammates. “I was a coach for several seasons and I also became a SoleMate,” said Jensen

Being a coach is one of the most valuable and fulfil activities that GOTR offers. All the coaches are volunteers and women. It requires approximately four hours per week for a 10-week commitment. “Personally, I was able to coach both groups, and when I finished after 3 years of coaching, they were looking for

someone to fill the position at the organization I am in right now. I became part of the staff in 2012,” Jensen said.

Girls on the Run, relies on volunteers to run their programs. The University of Cincinnati has been part of the project with their athletes, coaches and relatives. Leah Maschino, a former Track and Field athlete at UC, who has been helping the 5k during fall said; “I chose to volunteer with Girls on the run because as a female, getting to help motivate girls to pursue a sport I am very passionate about was very rewarding.” Says, “The experience was very great and motivating for me. I was put in the role of helping girls warmup for the race, dancing and talking with them, cheering them on during the race, and helping line the course. Getting to see young girls succeed running a 5k made me remember why I started running and was a great reminder of how blessed I am to have the ability and resources to run.”

The three times Olympian, Nadine Faustin-Parker and also a coach at UC track and field, has been a supporter of Girls on the Run for a long time. She is who makes possible to bring the women’s UC track and field team to the 5ks in the fall. “It is a great opportunity for us as a team and for the young girls to get together at least once per year, share our hobbies and make this sport even bigger” said Parker. “One season we had as many as 40 to 50 members of the team in there, it was really fun. It is a great way to give the girls something to look forward to, to let them know that they can be a runner in any way, shape, or form and it is just nice to have that support in there. It is a win-win situation,” said Jensen

One of the students who became a volunteer for two years, Rylee Penn a junior at UC and coached by Parker, is another former athlete of the women's Track team. She has taken part on the two last 5k. "I would recommend volunteering for Girls on the Run because it is a non-profit organization that not only helps people locally but does across the nation. There are countless positions and ways that people can easily help volunteer to make a big difference for the next generation through inspiring girls to be joyful, confident, and lead healthy lives," she said.

Girls on the Run "solemates" are a community made up of passionate people who raise money for GOTR throughout donations in their web page. It is available to set up monthly or one time donations. Whether they're counting miles on the trail, laps in a pool, reps in the weight room, or downward dogs in the studio, all SoleMates share a common desire to be champions for girls in the place they call home.

"Our SoleMates are charity athletes, who raise scholarship dollars for girls in the program," Jensen said. The families that register the girls can receive scholarships if they can't afford the \$165 expense of the program. "As a non-profit organization, we find ways to provide the chance to any girl who wants to participate," said Jensen.

Anybody can get involved in the organization. The 5km race, is one of the biggest events that the organization holds. There are two races per season and

they are meant to hold the celebration of the end of the season for the girls. It's the goal to achieve, they train and run it together as a big team.

There are usually around 14,000 people, taking part in the 5k counting girls, supporters, donors and anyone who comes to volunteer like the UC track team. "It is super fun to have the track team on stage, doing the warm-up for the girls, a dance party and it is so great for the girls to have positive role models to look up to and that is how we have that connection with the team" said Jensen.

The sport piece is just one part of the program created for the girls. The main point of the program is to be a youth development program focusing on the social and emotional skills that the girls need to be successful in life. Adding that fitness component adds a goal to make the girls aspire to and teach them to learn how to achieve a goal if they work hard and train together.

Countless people have helped GOTR is Mary Wienberg. She is an Olympian and Gold medalist in Beijing 2008, got involved in the program a while ago (even before Jensen), around 2009 as a supporter of the project. Wienberg said, "I usually go to the 5k and I show the girls my Olympic Gold medal, I think it is a great way to motivate them before a 5k and also, a way to show them that if I achieved what I wanted they can also achieve anything they want in life."

Without the connection with the Olympian Mary Wineberg, we would have never had the opportunity to have all the UC track with us. "Wineberg is another great role model for the girls to have. Mary was the one who connected us with the

UC team, through her husband, Chris Wineberg, which is a UC track and field coach as well” said Jensen.

As Kathy Jensen did at a time, families are also looking for a program for their daughters after school. People reach out to the program saying that they wish they had the opportunity to join a program like this when they were young.

Partnering with our community in as many ways and options is one of the goals of the organization. A lot of local sponsors like Children’s Hospital, TopGolf, Bear Paddle Swim School, and Fleet Feet Cincinnati which is their number one, are some of the external help to create scholarships and opportunities for the girls. Fleet Feet specifically provides trainers to all the girls in need of a pair of shoes.

To promote the organization, GOTR staff and volunteers try to be at as many events as possible in order to spread the word on what we do and what the organization is about. That’s actually how the program has grown, it started off as one team of 12 girls in Loveland, OH.

“It is just crazy, and it was all about word of mouth. It is amazing how the word spreads and it is how we keep getting more schools and people involved with the organization”, said Jensen.

The organization's headquarters is in Cincinnati but they serve in Northern Kentucky, and as far north as Oxford at Miami University, and even have some teams in Indiana.

Jensen says, "I am a very optimistic person and I really believe in positivity and as a teacher, I saw so many students struggle with so many issues so I think it is very important to be positive around young people. Resilience, Community, and Inspiration are three of the things that the girls have taught me during all these years. I get goosebumps every time I am at the finish line of the 5k watching those young girls achieving their goals."

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