

Latinos on fast-track to healthier lifestyles

Fun runs give lessons in wellness to girls in the Back of the Yards

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Veronica Garcia has been training for months for a 3-mile race this weekend, and she feels confident she will cross the finish line. The 12-year-old girl noticed Thursday how much easier running had become during a kickball game at her Back of the Yards middle school.

"I felt like I was flying," she said. "It felt like I didn't even touch the floor."

Garcia will be running with more than 1,000 girls from Chicago in the WonderGirl 5K Fun Run on Saturday. More importantly, she will run alongside 18 teammates from her small private Catholic school.

The girls of San Miguel School -- all Latino -- have met twice a week this spring in one-hour sessions to prepare for the run, but also to empower the girls by teaching them self-esteem and healthy habits. They are part of a national program called Girls on the Run that uses running to teach girls self-respect. The girls at San Miguel face unique health risks because statistics show Latinos are disproportionately affected by obesity and diabetes.

On Thursday, at the last practice before the race, the girls discussed how women are portrayed in the media before starting their laps. The girls pored over magazine images, complimenting photographs of Latino actresses and girls exercising and criticizing stories about too-thin celebrities and ads for diet drugs and plastic surgery. The girls face many challenges. They live in a poor, mostly Mexican-American community where the most reported crime is domestic violence, school officials said. And health-wise, they are also at risk -- half of Mexican-American women are obese, and they are almost twice as likely to suffer from diabetes as white women, according to the U.S. Department of Health.

The afternoon runs will lay a foundation for a healthy lifestyle so the girls will be more likely to avoid those statistics, their coach Angela Witt said. The 6th-grade teacher started Girls on the Run at the school two years ago.

"It's a good way to get exercise because they don't have to go to the gym or use equipment," she said. "Maybe they'll consider joining track in high school."

Girls on the Run aims to reach girls before they enter middle school, a period often marked by self-doubt and peer pressure, organizers say.

"That is generally when you start to worry about what everyone else thinks about you," said Kelly O'Brien, the local chapter's executive director. "Your identity gets caught up in what to wear and what boys think. We want them to find their own sense of identity, to feel good about their bodies, to stand up for themselves."

The program at San Miguel fits into the school's goal of encouraging smart kids from the neighborhood to go to college. "It is really important that girls feel empowered and in control of what happens to them," principal Michael Anderer-McClelland said. "Sports is a good way to do that."

Diabetes and obesity in the community are also concerns for school officials, who recently held a screening for the disease in which a third of 30 parents tested were found to be at risk.

The school encourages each pupil to get involved in a sport. Most of the 37 girls at the school participate in either running, basketball or softball.

Veronica Garcia, the daughter of two Mexican immigrant factory workers, also plays softball. She doesn't exercise to be thin, she runs because it makes her feel healthy, she says. Her sister teases her about not having curves, but she says, "I'm happy with my body."

At the end of practice, each girl shared a positive thought from the workout.

"I didn't give up," Garcia said triumphantly.

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