

HIGH COUNTRY RUNNING

More than miles — the lasting impact of Girls on the Run

BY KATHLEEN BARTON
Special to the Daily Sun

In communities across the country, and right here in northern Arizona, youth running is about more than pace, distance or finish lines. Through Girls on the Run, a national female-focused Physical Activity-Based Positive Youth Development program, it becomes a powerful vehicle for confidence, connection and lifelong growth.

A new national study reinforces what many local families, coaches and participants have long experienced firsthand. The Girls on the Run Alums Study, a third-party research effort, found that the program's impact extends well beyond a single season. Years after participating during elementary school, girls continue to draw on the skills they learned — confidence, emotional regulation, teamwork, and resilience — as they navigate adolescence.

The data tells a powerful story.

- 90% of alums reported positive changes in how they approach friendships and interact with peers.
- 91% said Girls on the Run helped them resolve conflicts.
- 81% credited the program with improving their ability to manage emotions.



COURTESY

Members participate with a Girls on the Run group.

• 95% shared that it influenced their appreciation for diversity and ability to connect with others.

Girls also consistently described the program as more inclusive, encouraging and focused on belonging than traditional sports, highlighting its unique role in supporting both physical and emotional well-being.

Since 2008, Girls on the Run of Northern Arizona has empowered 4,601 local girls through this evidence-based program. What begins as a twice-weekly curriculum that blends movement with life skills

culminates in a celebratory, non-competitive 5K — often a girl's first.

But the finish line is only the beginning.

Behind every season are dedicated volunteer coaches who lead lessons, build trust and model confidence and compassion. Their impact is lasting not only for participants, but also for the coaches themselves. In the most recent end-of-season survey, 100% of coaches said coaching was a valuable experience for them, and 100% said they saw increased confidence in the girls on their teams.

As longtime coach

Bob shares, "This will be my 12th season coaching Girls on the Run. It is the most enjoyable and emotionally satisfying thing I do. By the end of the 10-week season, I feel a heart connection with all of the beautiful young girls I've coached."

It's a sentiment echoed across the program and affirmed by the national study, where coaches are consistently named one of the most meaningful parts of the experience.

Access has always been a core priority for Girls on the Run of Northern Arizona. The program provides

scholarships to 60% of participants each year, ensuring every girl has the opportunity to participate, regardless of financial barriers.

At a time when many young people face increasing challenges related to self-confidence, mental health and social connection, this research underscores the importance of programs supporting the whole girl: mind, body and heart.

For participants, the miles they run are memorable. But it's the confidence they build, the friendships they form and the belief in their own potential that truly lasts.

To explore the full findings of the Girls on the Run Alums Study, visit <https://www.girlsontherun.org/alums-study/>.

If you feel called to step into something bigger than a finish line, Girls on the Run of Northern Arizona, a program of Elk Ridge Community Health, is recruiting volunteer coaches and teams now for the fall 2026 season, kicking off in late August. You don't need to be a runner; you just need to believe in the power and potential of girls.

Be the reason a girl believes in herself. Learn more and sign up today: <https://www.gotrna.org/coach>.

KATHLEEN BARTON IS THE COUNCIL DIRECTOR OF GIRLS ON THE RUN OF NORTHERN ARIZONA, A PROGRAM OF ELK RIDGE COMMUNITY HEALTH. A SELF-DESCRIBED "HOBBY RUNNER," SHE PREVIOUSLY SERVED AS AN ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER AND VOLUNTEER COACH. SHE IS DEEPLY PASSIONATE ABOUT EMPOWERING GIRLS (INCLUDING HER OWN GIRLS ON THE RUN PARTICIPANT) TO BUILD CONFIDENCE, CONNECTION AND A STRONG SENSE OF SELF.

RACHEL SMITH IS A MOM OF TWO AMAZING DAUGHTERS, A PROFESSIONAL RUNNER AND THE COORDINATING EDITOR OF THIS COLUMN. SHE WOULD LOVE FOR YOU TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE COLUMN AND SHARE YOUR RUNNING-RELATED STORY BY EMAILING HER AT [RACHSCHNEID18@GMAIL.COM](mailto:rachscheid18@gmail.com).

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We're looking for people who have demonstrated leadership, initiative and dedication to growth in their careers and communities.

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Nominations due by May 14

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