



Photo by Stacey Keare

Ayla Elam, left, and Ryan Hodge, fifth-graders at Woodside Elementary School, participate in the Girls on the Run program, which aims to help girls learn social and personal skills.

Local girls build confidence through running

By **Samantha Bergeson**

Special to the Almanac

Sophia, Katie, and Chloe say they enjoy their track practice. These kids, along with 14 other girls in the third-through fifth-grade at Woodside Elementary School, spend their Monday and Wednesday afternoons learning about life through a program that involves running and confidence-building.

Coached by moms whose kids go to the school, these 8-to-10-year-old girls make up Woodside Elementary "Girls on the Run" team, a branch of Girls on the Run Bay Area, which aims to help girls express themselves and learn social and personal skills in a non-competitive environment.

Girls on the Run Bay Area, founded in 2002, has more than 500 girls participating, ranging in age from 8 to 13.

Fifth-grade parent Shana Middler introduced the program this year to Woodside Elementary after volunteering for a team at her daughter's previous school.

The Woodside team practices 90 minutes twice a week for 10 weeks. At each practice, the team runs from one to three miles around the elementary

school campus.

Practices include discussions on topics such as drug-avoidance education, friendship advice, and social skills. In addition to learning the importance of maintaining a healthy body, the girls learn how to lead a healthy life, said Ms. Middler, the head organizer and coach.

Through group challenges, the girls are taught social skills, responsibility, and the importance of cooperation within a team. "They've just met every challenge we've put in front of them," she said.

The program has a strong community service component. The team has organized a drive to collect new or gently used sports equipment, such as basketball shoes, footballs, and soccer jerseys, to donate to such organizations as Kids 4 Sports, EPA Tennis and Tutoring, and Woodside Elementary School's partner, Ravenswood Elementary School District.

The Woodside girls are training for the 5K Lollipop Run, the Girls on the Run celebratory "fun run" through Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, set for Saturday, Dec. 4, from 10:45 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. Following the race, a festival of

music, face-painting, and family scavenger hunts will take place.

The girl runners say they have greatly enjoyed the experience, and hope to advance the program. "You get to know how to become a better you," said Katie.

Ms. Middler hopes to bring the program back in the spring with the help of more volunteers. ▀

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