Growing Girls, Wondrous Women

By Monica Hood

A warm Monday in Spring at 3:00pm, a normally quiet Mankato church suddenly erupts with the laughter of fifteen young girls flowing in for their after school practice. I sit in the back of the classroom observing as they begin their lesson of the day. “My favorite anything is unicorn pigs” one girl vehemently exclaims, and laughter ripples through the adults. Soon, the girls begin to reflect upon their friendships and what makes a good friend. These girls take part in the YWCA sponsored program, Girls On the Run, which inspires girls to be joyful, healthy & confident using a fun, experience-based curriculum which creatively integrates running. Facilitated by volunteer coaches, Girls On the Run is a 10-12 week program for girls in grades 3-5 that concludes with a 5k run and a community based project. I’m here to observe this practice as part of my partnership with the YWCA through my community based service learning course, Writing for Non-Profits.

English 310: Writing for Non-Profits is a community-based service learning (CBSL) course that matches students with a nonprofit to produce various types of writing, including a grant proposal. I am working with the YWCA of Mankato to develop blog posts to promote their Girls On the Run program. The YWCA loaned my partner and me a copy of the coaches’ manual, allowing us to view the objectives of each day's lesson. Our professor has provided us ample reading on interviewing techniques as well as articles addressing the lives of rural girls. The Girls On the Run Director, Amy, and the Community Engagement Manager, Erin, both work with us to make sure we are meeting the YWCA's needs as well as our course requirements.

Understanding that young girls are assaulted by society's unattainable beauty standards via the media every day, Girls On the Run works to combat the negative effects that can arise. The program teaches young girls to love themselves and to think critically about how women and girls are represented in media. While interviewing a group of girls, one named Anna really stuck out. Anna was taller than most but carried herself with as much poise and grace as a fourth grader possibly can. I watched as she worked through every question we asked, taking time to think deeply. When asked to give her final thoughts on the program, she said, “It’s hard to explain but I think we make a lot of friends in Girls On The Run. And you learn ways to eat healthier and [it] like mentally and physically improves you.” Anna has learned that mental health is just as important as physical health, and that when she takes care of them both, she is unstoppable!

“It is my hope that the lessons learned at Girls On The Run will help them to become strong, confident, kind young women who stand up for themselves and develop healthy relationships with themselves, friends and family, and their communities,” her coach stated, and I believe these lessons achieve those goals. Working with the YWCA and witnessing firsthand the impact of these incredible coaches/mentors has convinced me of the importance of continuing and expanding the program. A key principle of CBSL is civic engagement, or working to make a positive difference in the lives of the community, and my partnership with the YWCA has allowed me to do exactly that. What started off as an assignment for my ENG 310 class has transformed into an undeniable passion for the enrichment of young girls' lives. I mean, don’t we all want our young girls to grow up with the confidence to continue to change the world?