

# Program unites students, fitness mentors

## Youths can earn credits, learn about health

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Carly Whitchurch runs with English instructor Kevin Olson. High school students are meeting with older running enthusiasts who mentor them in life skills and healthy practices while exercising. / THOMAS PATTERSON / Statesman Journal

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A new program at Chemeketa Community College is working to bring together at-risk youths and mentors with the common goal of improving fitness.

Since February, students enrolled in Chemeketa's high school programs have had an opportunity to join the Running Mentors Program.

The students are paired with runners from the community to help the students learn about living healthfully and also earn high school credit.

The program includes about 17 students and nine mentors who run together at least twice a week, usually in the evenings.

"The goal of the program is really to provide some at-risk young people with an adult who might make a difference in their life as well as some encouragement and support to pursue physical fitness," said Steve Ritchie, one of the program's founders.

The idea for the program developed last summer, when Ritchie and his wife, Susan Murray, the dean of high school programs at Chemeketa, got together with Susan and John Gallagher of Gallagher Fitness Resources.

Ritchie and Murray said they were inspired by the Hall Steps Foundation's Small Steps Initiative, a similar running mentoring program that was founded by well-known runners Ryan and Sarah Hall.

Although the foundation does not fund Chemeketa's program, "They've encouraged us and they've supported us," Ritchie said.

The mentors for the program come from the various fitness and training groups and activities offered through Gallagher Fitness Resources.

"For a few years now, we've been thinking about what we could do that would be bigger than us, that would be very much community-oriented, very much with youth and with running," Susan Gallagher said. "(The running mentors program) was a good fit, a good match."

In addition to providing mentors, Gallagher Fitness Resources also donated running shoes and other apparel for the students.

According to Murray, the students in the program need more positive role models in terms of physical fitness.

"Besides not always doing well academically, because they have the challenges of poverty, they also face a lot of health issues in terms of their diet and their lack of exercise," Murray said.

In addition, Murray said, running gives the opportunity for students to form important relationships with their mentors.

"It's not only the running and fitness that's important, but it's also connecting with adults that have a really healthy and constructive lifestyle," she said.

Murray said the initial session of the mentor program has been successful. As a culmination of the program's first semester, the students and mentors are planning a 5-kilometer run at the end of the school year.

Although it already has made progress, Murray said, the program is only in its beginning stages.

"It's small, but it's a start," Murray said.

She hopes to expand it next year to include more locations and more participants.

Overall, the program's organizers said they hope it will instill in its students a desire to lead a different kind of lifestyle.

"They are going to learn from it more than they even realize at this point," Gallagher said.

"That's our goal is that they learn from the whole experience in ways that are transferable to other areas of their lives in those positive ways."