

# Colleen Kelly Howard: Cheering on Girls on the Run

Meredith Thomas 11 July 2017

The Executive Director of Girls on the Run Philadelphia, Colleen Kelly Howard, takes a deep breath and relaxes into her seat. We met in a crowded Starbucks during the short break she had in a session downtown. Howard is new to the role of Executive Director, but she is a seasoned champion of girls. With three daughters, herself, Howard's days consist of encouraging and guiding young girls at home and at work. Her middle daughter led her to Girls on the Run in 2013. She was a volunteer coach for her daughter's team and built up the confidence and determination of a group of wide-eyed, bouncing third graders. Howard was hired as Executive Director in 2014 and in effect, was the sole full-time staff member of Girls on the Run Philadelphia. As the conversation went on, I quickly noticed her ironclad work ethic as she described how she approached every challenge that came her way. That attitude resulted in the organization's revenue increasing twofold between 2014 and 2015. As I later learned, that was only the beginning. Howard continuously looks towards the future, keeping a steady eye on any opportunity to help the organization grow. As the only staff member, she spends about 65 percent of her time on programming and 20 percent of her time on

fundraising.

Programming is the most time-consuming aspect of her role; however, Howard has overcome several barriers in that respect as well. Both the elementary school program and the middle school program have skyrocketed due to Howard's persistence and determination to introduce Girls on the Run to as many Philadelphia-area schools as possible. The organization hosted two teams in 2013 and by last spring, that number had jumped to 25 teams of girls from different backgrounds running together in their final 5K at the end of a semester of training and mentorship. All the girls who participate in Girls on the Run share the common goal of completing the celebratory 5K. This complements the organizational mission of building a positive self-image and confidence in every girl in the program as they reach for that goal. The teams, broken down by school, are guided by volunteer coaches and many participants pay a registration fee if they are able. However, Girls on the Run is driven by their mission to provide an opportunity to any girl who wishes to participate, and for Howard -- that is her greatest motivation. It is clear through our conversation and her impressive results as executive director that she is passionate and dedicated to raising both revenue and the scope of the program to give every girl in the region the opportunity to participate in Girls on the Run and win.

To make that goal feasible, Howard has narrowed the focus of her working board to raise money through

individual giving, grants, and targeting schools where the families can afford the fees. Howard sends out appeal letters to her entire network and writes many of the grants herself. While it is tedious and arduous to reach out to high net worth individuals, foundations, and companies, she enjoys the rewarding work of grant writing and networking to raise the profile of the organization. When Girls on the Run Philadelphia was overlooked for a grant opportunity for the second year in a row, Howard reached out to one of the members of the foundation and asked what she could improve. Her proposals needed to spell out the need for the program in the area and once she tailored her grants to that feedback, the organization started to win more and more grants and funding support. With these resources, Girls on the Run Philadelphia can give hundreds of girls in the region an opportunity to learn, grow, and run in the program regardless of their socioeconomic status.

The impact of these programs and the funds that make the programs available to all children is significant. Howard shared the survey responses from parents of participants, coaches, and the girls themselves. Girls who completed the program, as reported by their parent or guardian, were significantly more likely to have a positive body image. Beyond the clear impact on their emotional and mental health, participating girls also value healthier lifestyles and physical activity after competing in their first 5K. The greatest challenge that the organization currently

faces is the completion rates from parents and their lack of data on girls who have graduated from the program. Acknowledging these shortfalls, Howard looks to incentivize future parent surveys and create an alumni program to collect information on graduates of the program and involve graduates of the program as ambassadors. Howard's commitment to better evaluating the organization's impact and creating sustainable results speaks to her ability to maintain a long-term focus and her passionate pursuit of effective change in Philadelphia.

Howard's goals in the coming years are ambitious, very much like her own character of will. Based on the organization's strategic plan and the recommendations of their board consultant, she is eager to fill their new office space with full-time program and fundraising staff members. This business maneuver will help refocus her time on fundraising and increasing the presence of Girls on the Run in Philadelphia. Howard aims to make the organization as well-known as some of its other local counterparts and establish its place in the city's nonprofit sector. With more staff support, her passionate and highly-motivated board members could also shift towards a governing role and as a result, focus energy towards increasing the organization's capacity with fundraising to serve more girls.

Howard's unique perspective as a past coach and as the parent of a participant has served her well as she navigates the unfamiliar territory of leading a young

nonprofit organization. With little formal experience, outside of managerial and operations positions, Howard plowed through barriers and forged a path to success for Girls on the Run Philadelphia. Her stunning increase in revenue and communities served speaks volumes to her leadership abilities. Howard is a strong and decisive voice for the girls who participate in Girls on the Run. She works tirelessly to achieve sustainable results and achieve the mission of her organization. With Colleen Kelly Howard leading the team, Girls on the Run Philadelphia is destined for greatness.