

Youth Fitness Program is a Runaway Success



Photo: Keili Uldall

Mike Dove and Susan Love manage Just Run, a youth fitness program that helped Spencer Gamble (center background) run a triathlon, and his sisters Julia and Sylvia run in other events.

In April, one day before the Big Sur International Marathon, young runners will take part in the Just Kids 3K. The event is presented by the marathon's Just Run program, a non-competitive, Web-based initiative that encourages children to exercise, eat well and effect positive change in their communities.

Just Run Program Administrator Susan Love says it's all about encouraging healthy habits that last.

"The most important thing is for kids to have fun and realize that fitness and exercise are part of an ongoing lifestyle," she says.

"I think Just Run is a great program because people of any age—even grown-ups—can do it," says 7-year-old Sylvia Gamble, a three-year Just Run participant. "It doesn't matter what you look like and it's really fun."

Sylvia's siblings, 11-year-old Julia and 14-year-old Spencer, also are program veterans; in September, Spencer competed in the Pacific Grove Triathlon.

Their mother, Shannon Dunne-Gamble, coordinates Just Run at

Carmel's Junipero Serra School. She's seen students improve their coordination, endurance and overall fitness.

"Anytime you can encourage a healthy lifestyle, it benefits kids and their parents. This program wraps it up in a neat little package with exercise, nutrition and good deeds," she says.

Just Run schools receive free bilingual materials and program support, as well as complimentary incentive awards for students. During the 2007-'08 academic year, the program served more than 6,700 children across 14 states. Together, participants logged 226,000 miles and collected bracelets, charms, certificates and T-shirts as they reached major milestones. In

addition, they completed 25,000 acts of good citizenship through the Just Deeds component, and 2,200 students ran in Just Kids 3K events. A new Just Taste element encourages participants to add fruits and vegetables to their diet, as well.

Though it is less than five years old, Just Run has already earned major recognition. California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports gave the program a gold medal, and the national sports trade association Running USA named Love and program developer Mike Dove "Youth Fitness Contributors of the Year" in 2007. *Runner's World* magazine has also featured the program.

"We feel we're doing something significant. It is a solution. It's not the solution, but it is a solution to the problem of childhood obesity," Love says.

To support the Big Sur International Marathon Just Run program, or to learn more, visit www.justrun.org or call 831/625-6226.

—Renee Brincks