

Rotary  
Club of  
Charlotte



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

March 26, 2024

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## *Molly Barker, Founder, Girls on The Run*

by **Susie Masotti**

**Shelley Dean**, Owner/Founder/CEO of Crossway Pediatric Therapy and Crossway Academy introduced this week's speaker – Molly Barker. Molly founded Girls on the Run in 1996 with 13 girls here in Charlotte, NC. And now is included in schools in all 50 states, inspiring over 2.5 million girls. Molly is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is an accomplished athlete, educator, and visionary. Barker's contributions to society were recognized by George W. Bush and Barack Obama with a Daily Point of Light Award presented at a White House ceremony and by the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in 2008 with a Distinguished Alumna Award. As an athlete, she is a 4-time Hawaii Ironman triathlete as well as an Elite Cyclist (Olympic Qualifier). Molly marches to the beat of her own drum and believes that our view of the world should come from our dreams. Molly has strong Rotary roots as her father, Hank, was a Rotarian for many years. Molly is the proud parent of James and Helen; and continues to enjoy running with her dog, TJ.

Molly thanked everyone for welcoming her and was pleased to see so many familiar faces. She commented that as the "Founder" of Girls on the Run, inevitably a girl in some middle school will select her to write about during Women's History Month and it has been written in such a report that she is "still alive" all these years later.

Molly left Girls on the Run in 2013 to pursue other opportunities but is proud that the basic principles remain – that every girl knows and activates her limitless potential and is free to pursue her dreams. Molly began her

comments by asking those gathered what it is in all of us that makes us who we are – several said souls, and someone suggested joy, but the answer Molly was looking for was Essence. Essence is the core of who we are and is uniquely ours and it is what we leave sprinkles of behind throughout our lives.

In today's world, even more than when Girls on the Run started, young girls need a place where they can feel that they are enough. With all the social media influence, issues with mental health, and peer pressure, Molly feels that expectations from today's girls are even higher.

Molly's Mother turned to alcohol to cope, as did many women of her era. Molly was 10 years old when her mom stopped drinking. To fill the void that was left, she began running the streets of Myers Park (there weren't running shoes back then) and it gave her a release. When Molly was 14 her mom asked her if she'd like to run with her and she gladly accepted. During those mornings, Molly began the process of knowing who she was. Even though she had sworn it wouldn't happen, at some point when she was between 14- and 15-years old Molly herself began drinking at a friend's parents' home by making her friends drinks. Like many women of her generation, she saw her power through men rather than in herself and hid it in drinking. It wasn't until she was 32 years old that she hit rock bottom and called her sister for help – her sister's advice was to go to sleep and see how you feel in the morning. That next morning, she went for a run. A storm was brewing – because of the weather she was focused on getting through the run and really felt nothing – not as a woman, an alcoholic, or a runner. She realized that she had been allowing those roles to define her throughout her life. Her life immediately changed, and she had the inspiration to start Girls on the Run not only as an exercise program but an empowerment program.

Molly first approached Charlotte Country Day School about creating a Girls on the Run program, and the reply was "Sounds cute." Molly knew from that first group of 13 girls that her program was making a difference because those girls were truly lit from within after each meeting. Girls on the Run grew first in Charlotte, then across North and South Carolina, and has grown to all 50 states. New Balance came on as a sponsor, and hundreds of thousands of individuals volunteer to coach and participate in the end-of-program 5k each year. Today 2.5 million girls are participating and growing. The program centers around training to run a 5K and at the end of the training session, they play games to learn life skills. At the end of the program, participants are asked to participate in a community service project. The girls always have BIG aspirations (like world peace) but come around to something smaller and more manageable. The first group of girls created a giant greeting card for a local retirement home.

Molly shared a few stories from Girls on the Run: One young lady finished in just 20 minutes which was fast! Molly caught up to her and asked her how she did it – the reply was "I put one foot in front of the other and did it fast." The lesson here is to keep it simple – it's not hard.

At another 5K, all Molly could hear before the race was that "Victoria" was going to win. Molly positioned herself at the end of the race fully expecting Victoria to finish first. As participants ran

by there was no sign of Victoria. Finally, everyone else had finished and in the distance, you could see this young lady walking very slowly and deliberately to the end. When she got to the end, she shooed everyone away from her who came to meet her - she had a dragonfly on her shoulder and didn't want to disturb it, race or not! Sometimes you must let them do it their own way and along the way, they may stop and smell the roses.

One year at Country Day, Molly was walking with the girls on the last day and ended up walking with Madeline. Their discussion led to God. Madeline believed that when God has a problem, he wraps that problem up in a human body and sends it down to earth until the problem is solved. Sometimes the problems are big and require more than just 1 body, but the goal is to get the problem out before you die. Our young people have a lot of insight. The lessons you learn from listening can be life-changing.

Molly then took some questions from the membership:

Molly was asked if the needs of young people are getting bigger or smaller. Molly replied that in her world it's getting better, but in the broader world, the access our children have to social media is making it very difficult for problems to remain small.

Molly was asked if she had any ongoing participation with the Red Boot Society and she stated that she is no longer involved because it became too overwhelming for her personally.

Molly was asked about her move to Marfa, TX. The move was made to allow her to collect and reorganize herself. It's a place that brings her calm and peace and she continues to enjoy spending time there. Currently there is not a Girls on the Run group in Marfa, but there may be soon!

Finally, Molly was asked if Girls on the Run ever encountered any issues with Title IX. Molly said that they had been challenged, but that any challenges ended without negativity.

A recording of the meeting can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/931219664/b7f2ac5b31>  
The program introduction begins at approximately 12:07 minutes.