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CHRIS CUTRO/ FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

PROUD AND FIT

Olympic sailor Magnus Liljedahl checks out a medal given to Shenandoah middle schooler Josie Palacios, 14, for excelling in the World Fit program and pushing the limits of physical fitness. [PAGE 4](#)

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CLASS ACTS

For kids walking the walk, Olympic thrills

Olympic athletes are pairing with students to spread the message: walking isn't just healthy, it's fun.

BY HOWARD COHEN
hcohen@MiamiHerald.com

Esther Kirby laughs when she tells you who she has on her speed dial.

"Gary Hall Sr. I talk to him all the time on the phone," she said. "It's surreal to be friends with an Olympic athlete. I have to tell my friends, 'Hold on a minute, Gary Hall is calling me!'"

If Kirby, the athletic director at Miami's Shenandoah Middle School, is that excited, imagine how the kids feel.

"I was amazed; it's pretty cool talking to a real Olympian," said Erick Rosales, 13, a Shenandoah seventh-grader.

What they are buzzing about is World Fit, a fitness initiative of the U.S. Olympians Association and Paralympians that Hall co-created last year. Hall runs The Race Camp, a swimming training facility with locations in Miami and Islamorada.

The program, in its inaugural year at four Miami-Dade middle schools (Nautilus, Shenandoah, Riviera and South Miami) and 14 other schools in other states, encourages students to walk at least 60 miles in six weeks. Each school is assigned an Olympic athlete who "adopts" the school

and serves as a mentor.

"It's a great way to stay in shape on school property," said Cerline Hyppolite, 14, an eighth-grader at Shenandoah who adds football to her fitness mix. The walking helps her game, she said. "I don't get tired as much; it keeps me running."

Cerline met her school's mentor, Magnus Liljedahl, 56, a 2000 gold medalist in sailing who adopted Shenandoah.

"I think that was really cool. He was in the Olympics and talked to us about being fit," she said.

The children log their miles on computer and pair with buddies, teachers and even parents, who are encouraged to come to the school to walk with their kids and staff.

For teachers, walking around the schools with students can help foster bonding.

"You get to see a different side of them than when you are telling them what they can and can't do," Kirby said. "They'll jump in with you and want to walk with certain teachers."

Shenandoah science and geography teacher Cindy Jolicoeur walks three miles a day, morning and afternoon, with her students.

"I could tell the kids were socialized more. They enjoyed the time to be outside of the classroom and to be able to talk



within a more comfortable environment and, at the same time, walk. Parents were out there, too — some wore ankle weights and got into it. Most of the time, we didn't realize how much we were walking."

Students who hit the 60-mile mark earn certificates. The competitive can walk further and aim for medals. Each school sets its own criteria to earn a medal.

The program's main goal, Hall said, is to help kids stay trim and healthy.

"The child obesity problem is, A: epidemic, and B: Who better to talk about the importance of fitness than an Olympian?" he said.

Hall, 58, a three-time Olympic silver and bronze medalist in swimming in 1968, '72 and '76, mentors Nautilus in upper Beach.

"It started with two schools, Shenandoah and Nautilus, and when I went in and gave the talk to Nautilus they realized how important it was," Hall said.

"World Fit is an outstanding program," said Michael Smith, Nautilus' administrative assistant. Students at Nautilus walk the perimeter of the school,

about half a mile one time around.

"They usually walk four times around after lunch or in the afternoon when the teachers are finished lecturing, and it gives students time to release steam after lunch," Smith said.

Smith, 42, a former football player, found a way to make the program a win for the older folks, too. "We teachers walk after class. It prepared us. A lot of our teachers did the Corporate Run."

Meeting Olympians was also, well, cool, Jolicoeur said.

"As an adult meeting an Olympian, it was beneficial to see how someone can be healthy and prolong health activities. It gave us a boost to do the same for ourselves and to boost our kids' morale."

The other Olympians include:

- KC Boutiette, 40, a four-time Olympian speed skater (once married to fellow speed skater, Miami-born Jennifer Rodriguez) who mentors Riviera.

- Lauryn Williams, 26, a University of Miami grad and 2004 silver medalist in track and field, who works with students at

FRESH AIR, GOOD EXERCISE: Sasha Budhai, Ciara Smith, Wadline Fritz lead the way for the rest of their classmates participating in the World Fit program at Nautilus Middle School. Their goal is to walk 60 miles in six weeks.

South Miami.

"It's a great cause," Liljedahl said. "I'm big on analogy. If you have a huge lead in sports, chances are you'll win. If you exercise early on in life, you'll have a healthy life going forward. This can make a big impact."

Liljedahl signed up for the program because he believes children need positive role models. "It's important for [children] to have somebody to inspire them."

With 18 schools on board nationwide and 350,000 miles logged so far, Hall eyes a larger number for next year. He says he'd like to see at least 200 schools sign up and expects to see participation in Broward County, as well.

It's not like he lacks Olympians; there are at least 6,000 of them in the United States, he said.

"We're trying to get every Olympian we can to adopt a middle school for life," Hall said. "As long as they can get out of bed once a year to go into their school, those are *their* kids."

To find out how to get your middle school involved with World Fit, visit www.worldfit.org.

Nominate a Class Act

Do you know a Class Act? Twice a month, Neighbors will profile a person or program making an impact at a local school — like a dedicated teacher, an interesting school club or a student who makes a point of helping others in the community. If you know of someone or something at a local school, learning center or university that's worthy of a Class Acts profile, let us know. Send ideas to Neighbors editor Tere Figueras Negrete at tfigueras@MiamiHerald.com, or to 1 Herald Plaza, Miami FL 33132.

