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Thursday, October 25, 2007

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Athletes set right example



Young girls are bombarded with negative messages telling them how to act or look. Being fake is better than reality. Being shallow brings more attention than intelligence. Some very accomplished women, such as swimmer/triathlete/pentathlete Sheila Taormina of Livonia and hockey player Angela Ruggiero of Harper Woods, want to do something positive to fight this toxic pop culture sludge.

Taormina, Ruggiero, gymnast Shannon Miller and weightlifters Cheryl Haworth and Natalie Woolfolk are traveling Michigan the first week of November for the "Sharing the Dream" tour. They will hit Trenton, Livonia and Houghton in their quest to inspire kids to dream big and strive for real achievement.

"I want them to look at all of us, and realize we were once kids like them, we're all now women of different sizes, shapes, backgrounds. Success comes in many packages," said Taormina, who won Olympic gold swimming in the 1996 Atlanta Games. "You don't have to be stick-thin, or short or tall, or whatever. Just be yourself.

"But be the best self you can be, through education, training hard and really giving your best effort. I think that's a message that gets lost today. We want to lead the discussion."

The tour kicks off Nov. 2 in Trenton. The city's school district and parks and recreation department are teaming for a closed session for high school and middle school students. On Nov. 3, the women will conduct a public forum at Livonia Churchill High. Doors open at 8:30 a.m.; the event starts at 9. Tickets are \$3 in advance (available at the Livonia parks and recreation office) or \$5 at the door.

A few lucky kids, chosen at random, will work out with the women in the afternoon. Hockey players will skate with Ruggiero. Gymnasts will train with Miller.

Taormina, Haworth and Woolfolk will share their sports with kids.

The women then hit the road, driving together in an RV, to the U.P. Their final stop will be at Michigan Tech on Nov. 5.

The approach will be straightforward: The five women are some of the best in the world at what they do. Miller has seven Olympic medals, Ruggiero three, Taormina and Haworth one each.

Woolfolk, Taormina and Haworth hope to compete in the 2008 Beijing Games. Ruggiero recently decided to start training for the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

And they're all either in college or graduates. Miller just graduated from Boston College law

school, Ruggiero is a Harvard grad.

Bottom line: They're accomplished, smart and -- gasp -- cool women.

"We want to convey to the kids that we worked really hard and things happened for us, even if people told us our dreams weren't real or possible," Ruggiero said.

"We didn't take shortcuts to get ahead. All of us have worked very hard to be the best, both at school and in our sports. And we didn't get trapped by how society says we should look or act. We just were ourselves, and we've all worked hard to reach our dreams."

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