



## molly barker

Filling girls' spirits with strength and self-esteem.

Molly Barker remembers vividly the July night 13 years ago when she hit rock bottom. An alcoholic more or less since adolescence, Barker seemed like she had her life together: She held a master's degree in social work, had taught high school chemistry, and completed three Ironman triathlon competitions.

But inside, she couldn't shake the overwhelming self-doubt that plagued her. That night before dropping off to sleep, Barker called her sister to say that she was considering suicide.

The next evening, Barker went for her daily run—it was then that she experienced an epiphany that would change her life. "My drinking was out of control, I had lost or quit every job I'd ever had, I couldn't even make rent, and I was running and training like crazy to deny to myself that I had a problem," says Barker, now 45 and a divorced mother of two. But that evening, "I suddenly knew I was a beautiful, powerful, and authentic woman—I hadn't realized that before. I decided to devote my life to helping girls feel good about themselves and avoid the mistakes I'd made."

Barker sought counseling to get sober, and in 1996, she founded Girls on the Run ([girlsontherun.org](http://girlsontherun.org)). The organization brings together third- through eighth-grade girls for 12-week programs that combine training for a 5K race with self-esteem-boosting exercises. "I started drinking at 15 because I felt stuck in the 'girl' box—when you're struggling with being who you are as opposed to being who people think you should be," says Barker. "But I also started running then, and only on my runs did I feel like I was truly free to be myself. Girls on the Run is about sharing that experience."

What began as 13 girls and Barker meeting on an elementary-school track in Charlotte, NC, has exploded to more than 40,000 participants in 128 cities nationwide. Even the volunteer coaches feel the impact of Barker's mission and vision: One coach found the courage to leave her abusive husband after leading the girls through a lesson in standing up for themselves.

"We are changing many, many girls' lives," says Barker. "And my life, too. When I first started this, I felt like a little girl looking for a voice, and because of Girls on the Run, I've grown, and continue to grow, into the strong and competent woman I've always wanted to be." Meaghan Booth, a participant in last year's program in Boise, ID, reflected that feeling of empowerment in a poem she wrote for Barker about what she gained from Girls on the Run, which ends, "You've found your way/into the sky, you're in the spotlight/and now, you just fly." —Lindsey Palmer

## MARIA MENOUNOS

Challenging Hollywood stars to take action.

Five years ago, as a fresh-out-of-college reporter, Maria Menounos spent several weeks in South Africa covering the AIDS epidemic for the teen news network Channel One. On camera, the former Miss Massachusetts Teen USA displayed her signature poise as she and her crew traveled to the country's most impoverished areas. But behind closed doors, she could barely hold it together. "I was hit with a tornado of emotions," says Menounos, 28, the daughter of Greek-immigrant parents who always taught her to put herself in other people's shoes. Menounos was especially jarred by the suffering of children: the 13-year-old boy she met who was caring for his HIV-infected mother; the infant orphan she held in her arms one day, and mourned at a funeral the next. "Right away," she says, "I felt the call to do something."

Once stateside, Menounos gathered clothes, toys, and school supplies to send to the orphanages and villages she'd visited. Still, she wanted to do something bigger. Together with a friend, director Keven Undergaro, Menounos founded Take Action Hollywood! (TAH!). As a correspondent for *Today* and *Access Hollywood* (who has also recently added actress and director—of the independent film *Longtime Listener*—to her résumé), Menounos has been able to rally a host of Hollywood do-gooders to the wide range of causes that matter to her. She's tackled issues from girls' self-esteem to pet overpopulation (Menounos herself has adopted five rescue and shelter dogs), and she's currently raising money to produce a film on the AIDS crisis in South Africa. "Growing up the way I did, not speaking English, helping my parents sweep nightclubs to make ends meet," says Menounos, "I feel such an obligation to stand up for as many causes as I can. I don't want to leave anything out." —Penny Wrenn ▶

