

## **Theresa Roden** **Transforming young girls into mentors and leaders**

Founded in 2010 as a pilot, the Inspirational Triathlon Racing International, Inc.(i-tri) program fosters self-respect, empowerment, positive body image and healthy lifestyle choices for adolescent girls through the vehicle of training for triathlons. 10 years, 10 schools and hundreds of girls later, this grassroots organization is poised to begin a national expansion.

The inspiration for i-tri lies in the transformative path that led Theresa Roden to found the organization. At age 35, with the support of a group of women friends/mentors, she completed what would be her first of many triathlons. Roden had never been athletic in school and grew up with a less than positive self-image. Training for and completing the triathlon transformed her belief in herself and her abilities. With an 11-year-old daughter experiencing the same feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem, Roden knew that if her daughter could learn at 11 what Roden had just learned at 35, her future would be dramatically better. And so i-tri was born.

The program started as a pilot at Rodin's daughter's school. They selected 10 girls who were not in any athletic program and trained them for a youth triathlon. Providing them with the training, mentoring and emotional support necessary to complete the event. Following the pilot season, those first 10 girls wanted to do it again the following year, each finding a new girl to mentor. It now in 10 schools and seen 700 girls complete the program.

Four years ago, they began a 'Mentoring Day' inviting 60 professional women from different career fields and backgrounds to spend a day with the girls. 165 girls participated in small group

mentoring sessions as well as a whole group networking session. The 11-year-old girls went way out of their comfort zones to approach judges, CEO's and business owners, looking them in the eye and introducing themselves as they shook hands and distributed their own "business cards."

The success of the Mentoring Day events and the desire of the mentors to become more involved, led to the creation of Mentor Circle Groups. Bringing together High School aged alumni with the committed mentors, the program includes learning table manners and basics of cooking, an architectural tour and a trip to a university neurobiology science lab. This program is expanding in the fall to accommodate more girls and mentors.

As i-tri moves from a local grassroots organization to a regional and soon, national organization, the Executive Board of i-tri has stepped up to mentor the executive staff. Anne Starobin, who specializes in Executive Leadership Development and Linda Frankenbach, former CEO of fitsmi, are personally mentoring Roden, in her new role as Executive Director and spokesperson. Adeline Neubert, a finance professional and business coach, has been mentoring Cindy Morris as she takes on the role of COO.

**Rodin has proven that mentoring girls to achieve a physical goal can transform their self-image and belief in their innate abilities creating young mentors and leaders.**

**Theresa Rodin boosts a woman's power to advocate by:**

- Giving young girls the role models and the formula that will transform low self-esteem and body image into self-confidence and the ability to lead.

- Setting herself as a role model of how you can change your outlook by challenging yourself mentally and physically.
- Expanding the i-tri platform to include mentoring by professional women in business and exposure to life skills and STEM careers.

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### **In her own words**

“So really, the entire journey of i-tri, starts with my own journey. I was never an athletic kid, I always had low self-esteem, never felt proud of myself for anything that I did. I spent the summer on Block Island when I was in my mid-30's. One day I saw these crazy people running down the beach with numbers written in Sharpie on their arms jumping over sandcastles and everyone on the beach was cheering them on. I turned to a friend of mine, ‘What are they doing?’ ‘They’re doing the Block Island triathlon,’ he said. ‘What’s a triathlon?’ He explained it to me and that was my light bulb moment. I said, ‘You know what, I’m going to do this,’ which was so outrageous even to contemplate but I just knew it was right. I told a few of my girlfriends, we were all young moms at the time, and they said, ‘That’s a great idea. Why don’t we all train together?’

“They were all pretty athletic women to begin with, and then there was me. But what happened was we all supported one another and we learned how to train as we went along. I also was going through an internal transition during this external transition, so I was changing the way I thought about myself. I knew that if I kept up the old internal dialogue of, ‘I can’t do this. I’m too fat. I’m too slow. I’m all of these things,’ there was no way I was ever going to reach this goal. For

the first time in my life, I had to be supportive, kind and encouraging to myself. That changed everything for me. I learned about affirmations and how powerful they are, "I am strong, I am fast, I'm doing better today than I did yesterday, I will do it." And I also learned about visualization and seeing myself achieve my goal, living as if it had already happened. That is what got me to that finish line. And as great as the finish line moment was, and it was great, I realized that it was the journey from the day I had the idea until crossing the finish line, with the support from my friends and family, that changed my outlook.

"The real inspiration for i-tri was my daughter. She was 11 years old and I was seeing in her a lot of the same things that I had experienced. She wasn't going to be a team sport girl. I knew the importance of that in a child's life, and I thought to myself, 'If I had learned what I know now at her age what a difference it would have made.' What if we took a group of girls, who don't consider themselves to be athletes, who may be struggling with self-esteem and self-confidence issues, and give them all the love and the support and the training and the equipment, everything they needed to do this really big goal?

"So I pitched the idea at my daughter's school and it was just miraculous because the school agreed to a pilot program. We started with 10 girls that first year and it was one miracle after another making it all happen. They had an incredibly transformative experience. Eight of the girls who finished the race came back the second year and said, 'We love this so much that we want to do it again. We want to get more girls who can benefit to be a part of this.' They helped to create what i-tri is today: a regional program in 10 schools with 700 self-confident mentor

graduates and a plan to take to the national level. Our vision is that every single girl on the planet should have the opportunity to experience this transformational program.

**Taking action on Theresa's experience:**

- Identify a young girl, especially pre-teen, who you could train to enter an athletic competition and along the way build her self-esteem and confidence.
- Challenge yourself to train with women friends to reach a physical goal or enter a competition mentoring each other along the way.
- Learn to use affirmations and visualizations to reach personal and professional goals.