

# Club Running

WE RUN THE NATION!

Summer 2010

RRCA members enjoy a morning group run in Lakeland, Florida at the 52nd Annual RRCA National Convention. In this issue, read about how DAN SHIELDS (left) changed his life through running.

## The Golden Years of Running

## Summer Shoe Review

## RRCA Championship & Awards Spotlight



Also in this issue, RRCA member Jeff Horowitz recounts his encounter with the Himalayan 100-Mile Stage Race.



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# Run For Your Life

By Mishka Vertin

A strong gust of icy wind blew up the back of my running tank, causing my race number to twist and turn and crackle, threatening to defy the tiny safety pins holding it in place. As I jumped up and down in a somewhat futile effort to create body heat, I glanced behind me toward the origin of this gale force: the Pulaski Bridge. Every other day of the year this bridge marked the border between the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. Today, it marked something more—the halfway point in the world-renowned NYC marathon. I had been perched at the 13.1 mile marker for several hours, and while the chilly 40° temperature was ideal for running a marathon, it threatened to cement my muscles as I stood on the sidelines thoroughly underdressed. My fingerless gloves and knee-length tights were no longer cutting it, and I was desperate to begin running.

Desperate for warmth, but even more desperate for whom I was expecting to meet.

You see, I was waiting at the halfway point for a man named Louis\*, a member of the Odyssey House "Run for Your Life" team that I had been coaching as a volunteer for the past 6 months. I was a designated "guide" and would be leading Louis through the second half of the marathon, offering support, encouragement, and the occasional packet of Gu. And now, 2½ hours after the official start of the NYC Marathon, I was beginning to get worried. Worried because Louis' longest training run was only 18 miles. Worried because he had been having trouble with his knee. And worried because Louis had only begun running 4 months earlier, and prior to that, he had been a drug addict.

"The only time I ever ran was from the police," chuckled one of the Run for Your Life team members during one of our first practices in late April. During those first few workouts, it became evident that a lack of physical activity was a common theme in this group, when it was nearly impossible to get the runners to jog a loop of the Central Park Reservoir without stop-

ping. Odyssey House is a long-term residential drug treatment program and most of the 40 or so Run for Your Life participants had joined simply to get a few hours outside each week. Most had been mandated to the drug program by the criminal justice system, and had been threatened with jail time if they failed to successfully complete their 12 months.

I had discovered the program while visiting a young client of mine who I had helped get out of jail and into Odyssey House as part of my work as a social worker at a Bronx public de-

runner by all standards. But to the Odyssey House guys, I was the "real deal" as far as road racing was concerned. And so, during those first few months of struggling to make it all the way around the Central Park Reservoir, I filled the time with stories of my running experiences: the funny relay races, the various injuries, the times I got lost or chased by dogs.

The stories soon became stories of my life experiences, and eventually—after having gained some trust—they became stories of their life experiences. Shawn told me about his newborn daughter, about how difficult it was to be inside a treatment facility and missing the important steps of her first year. I listened as James talked about his little brother, and how proud he was that he hadn't followed in his footsteps, and how much he hoped to become someone his brother could look up to. Robert told me the story of the last group home he had been in, how he had been kicked out, and had nowhere to go. And LaToya would tell me of her visits with her 6-month-old daughter Katie, and how she was running because she wanted to be healthy and around to raise her daughter.

As the stories grew more intense, so did our mileage. By August, our regular workout had become the full 6-mile loop of Central Park. The team had even begun competing in local

venues, where they discovered their competitive spirit and I discovered that mediocre runners can take home huge trophies if they are willing to do 10Ks in Bed-Stuy! I will never forget our first race as a team, the Achilles' "Hope and Possibility," a race for athletes with disabilities. I stood with a couple of our team's teenagers—the age group that often has the most anger and, therefore, is the hardest to get motivated about making changes their lives. As we watched tiny children with prosthetic legs run across the finish line, I heard them remark to one another, "Man, maybe we don't have it so rough."

Run for Your Life is led by Andre Matthews, a recovering addict and one-time Odyssey House client who began coaching the program in 2001 after completing his first marathon. Over the past 8 years, he has led 250 other recovering addicts in completing the NYC Marathon. Inspired, I asked Andre if I could combine a personal interest—running—with my professional interest—helping people caught up in the criminal justice system—and help out with the team.

I began running 5 years ago mostly for the mimosa brunch I could indulge in with my running club, the New York Harriers, after a 5 or 10K race. I had completed a marathon and numerous half marathons, but was a recreational

runner by all standards. But to the Odyssey House guys, I was the "real deal" as far as road racing was concerned. And so, during those first few months of struggling to make it all the way around the Central Park Reservoir, I filled the time with stories of my running experiences: the funny relay races, the various injuries, the times I got lost or chased by dogs.

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\*Some of the participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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dential program. As time went on, he admitted to me that he was very angry at having to complete another entire program when he had only messed up once. But as Louis got more and more into his training, he became obsessed. "I have been asking myself all this time, 'Why am I here? Why am I doing this again?' And now I know. To discover running." And run he did; he never missed a practice, and as his interest in running terminology grew (negative splits! tendonitis! Prefontaine!), his race times shrank.

In fact, the improvement of most of the participants was just as astounding. One Tuesday night practice, I decided to run with Viktor, a small, handsome Dominican man who had become one of the team's best runners. Viktor was quiet, and I teased him as we started running. "Now Viktor, I am going to try and stay with you, but if I can't keep up I want you to go ahead." It was my job, after all, to make sure these guys kept going. I had come in ahead of him in a 5K the week before and I was naively confident if anyone was going to need encouragement to keep up the pace, it was going to be

Viktor. I let him lead and by mile 3, our 7:15 per mile pace was causing my thighs to seriously burn. "OK, Viktor, I can't keep up," I huffed out an admission. "You go on ahead without me." He turned to me, nodded OK, and ... slowed down a bit, too. I tried again: "Viktor, you're not even tired. I'll be fine. Go!" Viktor turned to me, nodded and ... continued two steps ahead of me. A few more rounds of this and I could see I was getting nowhere. Despite my pleading and his silent head nodding, Viktor the gentleman stayed exactly two steps ahead of me for the next 3 miles. He would, from time to time, attempt an inconspicuous glance behind him to make sure I was still there. And—thanks to him—I was.

Week after week they continued, through 18-mile-long runs in the pouring rain and beginners' injuries, all the way to the New York City Marathon, 39 recovering addicts, men and women who had complained about going out in the rain, who had hid in the bushes along the reservoir to sneak cigarettes, who were running for the most part in used gear donated by my running team, were about to cover 26.2 miles more than they had ever dreamed. And so,

there I was at the edge of the Pulaski Bridge on November 1, 2009, praying for the first time in a decade, praying that Louis would come through. Then, all of a sudden, my prayer was answered by a voice booming from the crowd.

"Woo hoo! Mishka! Get back here and get in a photo!" There he was, looking like a million bucks, posing for photos with family members and a few fellow Run for Your Life marathoners. And so it went for the rest of the race: cheering to the crowd, posing for photos, dancing to the bands, eating every piece of leftover Halloween candy handed to us. (I joked to Louis that this may have been the only race I'd ever run during which I actually gained weight!)

My own first marathon had been painful. I had been going for speed and it took me years to even think about running another marathon. But for Louis, it was different. He didn't care about speed. He cared about sharing this moment with his friends and family, about connecting with the people of New York, about having a great time, and about being grateful that he was healthy enough to accomplish something so huge, some-

thing so much bigger than he was. And that feeling of elation that I had hoped for, but had never come while crossing the finish line of my own first marathon? I felt it with Louis as we ran past Tavern on the Green with our hands held high.

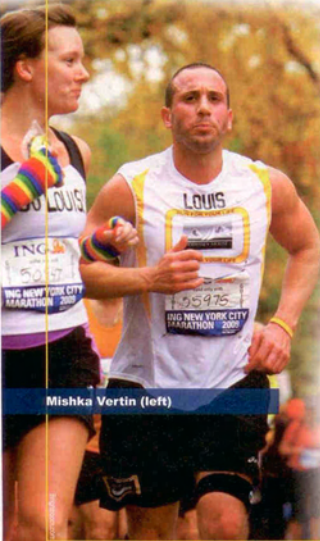
After the marathon, the mood among the Odyssey House finishers was different than what I am used to experiencing. No one talked about finishing times or splits or even wondered who had won the race. Instead they compared lines such as, "How 'bout when you tried to take that lady's banana and she snatched it back and said, 'This is for my husband!'" and "I can't believe you stopped and played the bongo drums with that band!" They patted each other on the back in respect and utter awe, making good on a promise they had made to each other and to themselves. "I have had some pretty emotional times in my life," said Alejandro, a program mentor and former addict, a few days after the race at the Run for Your Life awards ceremony. "My wedding day, the birth of my first daughter. But nothing compared to the emotion of finishing my first marathon."

"How many of you used drugs the morning of the New York City Marathon?" bellowed John Tavolacci, the executive vice president of Odyssey House and himself a marathon runner, to the crowd of finishers seated at the awards banquet. No hand went up. "And how many of you got high on the morning of the New York City Marathon?" The room erupted in cheers. "Now you know how to get high while doing something positive!"

The truth is, not everyone who started that first day of practice back in April made it to the awards ceremony. Some are discharged from Odyssey House for drug use, some decide they're not ready and leave. The young woman I had originally been assigned to guide in the marathon just walked out one September day and never came back. So does the program even help? As of yet, Odyssey House has not recorded any statistical evidence on the effects of the Run for Your Life program on the participants' long-term sobriety. But that doesn't really matter to Andre. Or to Louis, Or Viktor, or the 15 others who completed the marathon for the first time this year. Or to the countless other Run for Your Life alumni who return year after year as mentors and guides.

"I thought about leaving [the program] a few times," Louis announced to the audience at the awards banquet. "But the commitment to run for my life was the thing that kept me here." Louis will graduate from the program in January, and he has already committed to being back as a mentor for next year's marathon. And so have I.

*Mishka Vertin has been a member of the New York City Harriers and is a member of the North Brooklyn Runners. She has found a real community within the club.*



Mishka Vertin (left)