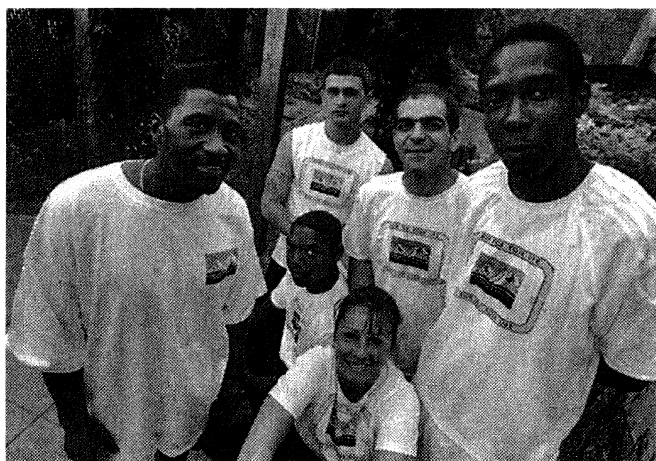


The New York Times

Sports Thursday

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2005

Rookie Marathoners Trade Addictions



Ting-Li Wang/The New York Times

Andre Matthews, far left, coached Odyssey House residents running Sunday's marathon: standing from left, William Walsh, Curtis Jenkins and Eddie Bryant; seated, Elijah Campbell and Renee Shepherd.

By SARAH LORGE BUTLER

Of all the jittery runners who will be shuffling near the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge on Sunday morning, anxious to hear the starting cannon for the New York City Marathon, Curtis Jenkins may be the most improbable.

Nine months ago, Jenkins, 29, was addicted to crack, a habit formed when he was 18. In February, he was charged with criminal mischief, his second felony arrest. His first, in 2000, for car theft, landed him in jail for a year and a half.

"Gone in 60 seconds? That was me," said Jenkins, a Brooklyn native. "I used my skills in a negative way to make money for crack."

This time, the judge gave Jenkins a choice: jail or a drug-treatment program. He chose the program. "I know I could have beaten the charge," he said. "But I also know I needed help."

Jenkins ended up at Odyssey House, a substance-abuse treatment center that has 830 patients at six residential centers in the city. And there, as part of his recovery, he started running.

He runs five or six miles at least three days a week. He has slowly built up to a long run of 18 miles on weekends. Now he is one of five residents who will be in the field of more than 35,000 runners taking a 26.2-mile tour of the five boroughs Sunday.

Jenkins will be joined by William Walsh, a 26-year-old former plumber's assistant and cocaine user from Brooklyn, who said his last thought before he drifted off each night was of the marathon. Last Sunday, at a 5-mile tuneup race in Central Park, Walsh finished in 35 minutes 8 seconds.

There is also Eddie Bryant, 41, a former Marine and father of eight who said he turned to drugs to cope with the death of his parents; Elijah Campbell, a baby-faced 21-year-old who arrived at Odyssey House through the court system and, since June, has cut 10 minutes off his 5-mile race time; and Renee Shepherd, 41, a North Carolina native who said she checked herself into Odyssey House after years of drinking.

"In the past, I'd have watched the marathon from a bar," she said. "I

never thought that would be me running."

They are guided by Andre Matthews, Odyssey House's 45-year-old recreation coordinator, who first completed the marathon when he was a resident in 2001. He has run New York every year since and hopes to qualify for the Boston Marathon someday. For now, he is too busy coaching the rookie marathoners.

They can seem an unlikely bunch, discussing race strategy, mile splits and hitting the wall. But the leaders of Odyssey House said it made perfect sense.

"As they're training for the marathon, they're training for the world beyond Odyssey House," said Vito Tomanelli, the program director. The lessons of long-distance running, from proper pacing to goal setting to delayed gratification, he said, are the same lessons the residents are learning in recovery.

For Odyssey House residents, the day begins at 6 a.m., and every minute is accounted for, with group therapy sessions, drug counseling, vocational training and work. But

Tuesday evenings, residents can work out in Central Park with the Achilles Track Club, an international organization based in Manhattan that helps athletes with disabilities compete in marathons.

As they progress from walkers to runners, shed pounds and grow more committed to the sport, the Odyssey House residents earn the privilege to run more often and enter local races on weekends.

This year, a new weekly hourlong meeting drives home the connection between running a marathon and managing a life. The marathoners and other residents who are starting to run gather Tuesday afternoons in a windowless, subterranean room in Odyssey House's facility on East 121st Street.

Seated in a circle and dressed in shorts and sneakers, they talk with Nell Hanks, a mental-health counselor and a volunteer with. Afterward, they head out for their workout.

"We talk about how job interview days are like race days, and that's the day you really need to show up," Hanks said. "It's so tangible, without a whole lot of psychobabble. People relate to roadblocks. It becomes a very physical connection."

Odyssey House staff members said they had noticed the positive effects of racing, no matter the distance.

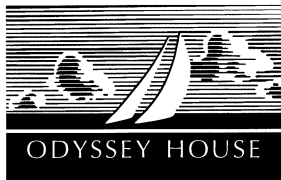
"A client goes out, they get a number, they run a race, they complete something," said John Tivolacci, chief operating officer and head of clinical services. "For some, it's the first time in their life that they've completed anything. They're around other people, and everyone's a winner. They get an official time. On top of that, the times improve. It's concrete. It's very powerful for a person who has a history of losing and not accomplishing things to have this."

Jenkins said that through running, "I've learned I'm not going to underestimate myself anymore; I'm going to ask more of myself."

Fifty Odyssey House residents and staff members will hand out water at the 19-mile mark at 116th Street and First Avenue, a few blocks from their facility. When they see other residents run by, they may realize that the 2006 marathon is not out of the question.

Then again, next year's team members may not have arrived at Odyssey House yet.

"One of the beautiful things about this program is that there may be someone in jail right now, or homeless on the street, who next year will be running the New York City Marathon," Tivolacci said.



Odyssey House provides quality substance abuse treatment, mental health, medical, and housing services to vulnerable New Yorkers. Family-focused residential and outpatient treatment meets the needs of women with children, adolescents, young adults, the mentally ill, the homeless, people with HIV/AIDS, and senior citizens.

For more information on our services, please visit: www.odysseyhouseinc.org or call: 212-987-5100.