

MY RUNNING STORY IN 1200 WORDS OR LESS  
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If someone had told me at the onset of medical school that they had a “hobby” for me that would keep me in great shape well into my 60’s, would allow me to spend quality time with my family, bring strangers together and fund research that would benefit thousands of people, I would never have believed them.

In the spring of 1975, I was twenty-two and finishing my first semester of medical school in Guadalajara, Mexico. My classes were productive, there were many American students, several activities and friends but, I missed my girlfriend and my family. First year physiology class gave me an explanation of how metabolism changes as we age. In anatomy, I was given an obese cadaver to dissect, which convinced me that I needed to stay fit.

I decided to take advantage of the beautiful year-round climate and put one foot in front of the other on a daily basis. I started by running a ¼ mile in a beautiful nearby neighborhood. I ran every day and created my own schedule to increase distance, as there were very few “how-to” books for runners at that time.

I have been running my entire adult life. At some point I became aware that it was changing me. I always knew running was a positive thing, physically. But the fact that running evolved into something more continues to leave me in awe, as it has touched every aspect of my life. For the record, I have never been that fanatical runner who preaches the benefits of running to everyone. My story is just what it has done for me. And let me give full credit to my previously mentioned girlfriend, who became my wife, my cheerleader, my therapist, and my rock for the last 46 years.

After three semesters in Mexico, now married, we came back to New York where I studied for six months to take the medical boards that would allow me to transfer to a US school. I studied all day, stopping only for a five-mile run. In spring of 1977, I was accepted as a transfer student into the 3rd year class at Mount Sinai, in New York.

I began running in Central Park, along the East River, or the West Side. I was ecstatic, feeling like I was floating. One Sunday in the Fall, I came across an army of runners coming down First Avenue which turned out to be the NYC marathon. I vowed to do it the following year. In my last year of medical school, having stepped up my mileage, I ran my first marathon, never expecting that 40 years later I would still be running the 26.2 miles regularly.

Now runners can get obsessed with training, and I probably was. Running was a great release from the stress of studying and practicing medicine. Instead of being competitive with my peers, I became competitive with myself. I was running up to 100 miles a week, and even though I’m not a natural-born fast runner, all that training resulted in two sub-three-hour marathons when I was 28 years old. It was almost like an out-of-body experience and now, 37 years after my peak performance, it feels like it was a dream, except it was all recorded.

Whether it was the stress of being a young doctor, career advancement or family issues, running was my sanctuary. Whenever I was tense, my wife would tell me to go for a run, which would give me quiet time to clear my head, reflect, plan, gain perspective and be thankful for my good fortune.

My running was not always a solitary activity. I often would meet friends for a run. Arguably running might have taken some time away from my family but I had no idea initially what the positives would be. Many of us learn our parenting skills by the seat of our pants (or the seat of our running shorts) but I never appreciated initially how our kids learn by what they see us doing. If they see us reading, they read and if they see us running, they run. My son ended up running three seasons of track for each of his four years of high school. At 14, he met me at mile 18 of the NYC Marathon to run the last 8 miles. In his last year of college, he ran his first NYC marathon with me and we now have run five marathons together. My beautiful daughter runs as well. We have run the Brooklyn Half- Marathon for the last six years.

I could say more about the Zen-like benefits of running but something much more practical happened. After running in 21 NYC Marathons over 27 years, the event became increasingly more difficult to gain entry to participate. Through luck and good fortune, our Children's Inflammatory Bowel Disease Center at Mount Sinai became one of 12 organizations that would be given entries in the marathon, in exchange for runners raising money for their organization. For the last 13 years and counting, we have had between 20 – 30 runners on our team, all who raise money for research. Our runners are special, as they are some of my former patients, now grown, as well as other individuals with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, collectively known as Inflammatory Bowel Disease or IBD. Our runners include parents, aunts, uncles, siblings, spouses and health care providers including nurses, gastroenterologists, surgeons and researchers. The runners who have IBD are a true inspiration, demonstrating that no illness needs to get in the way of life.

We always have a few team activities that included runs in Central Park, a dinner two nights before the race, and a team bus that drives us to the toll plaza at the Verrazano Bridge where the race begins. We each have TeamIBDKids T-shirts with our names on it. For the last dozen plus years, we've been lucky enough to be able to stay in a tent leading up to the race. On the bridge waiting, I always get teary-eyed, being thankful that I am in the position to physically do this for a great cause.

The first half of the race is always easier, then it becomes work, then it becomes painful, but then, I'm in Central Park, knowing that with two miles to go, there will be another race in the books. All along the race course, strangers cheer you by name (the benefit of your name on the T-shirt) and my family and friends are at various points. Colleagues and patient families are waiting by the hospital at mile 23.

There is a glow after the race that lasts for weeks. Team members keep in touch and are invariably thrilled to have run the race with similarly motivated people. I am extremely gratified to have completed another marathon with my TeamIBDKids fundraisers. Incredibly, over 13 years, we have raised 4 million dollars to for research at the Center. I know I cannot marathon forever, but at the end of the day, I can't think of any reason I would not do it again next year.