The Running Program That's Pulled 13,000 Out of Homelessness
by Chris Peak

t 5:45 a.m., on a recent Friday morning, a group of about 20 homeless guys warmed up in a parking lot across the street from three shelters in East Harlem. In a circle, they did jumping jacks, twisted their torsos and touched their toes. Fifteen minutes later, they huddled up, chanted the Serenity Prayer ("God give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change....") and took off running. As they criss-crossed the bridges between Manhattan and the Bronx during their four-mile trek, the sun's strengthening rays — bright but not yet burning — reflected off the windows of nearby towering apartment buildings. The streets were nearly empty, and quiet, a rarity in The City That Never Sleeps.

Ryan [last name omitted] began jogging with the group, known as Back on My Feet, seven months ago. Never a runner, he always wondered what the big deal about it was. Ask him today, however, and he'll tell you it's "so natural, almost spiritual." Moreover, running strengthens him and teaches him consistency. Less than a year after first hitting the pavement, Ryan completed a half-marathon and is studying to be a certified substance abuse counselor. As he looped around 138th Street onto the Madison Avenue Bridge, he thought he'd be ready for the NYC marathon a couple months away.

Team Bowery North members and volunteers circle up to say the Serenity Prayer and do a cheer before a 5:45 a.m. run in Manhattan, Aug. 7, 2015.Chantal Heijnen for NationSwell

Back on My Feet is a program that uses running to help the homeless get their lives back on track. In addition to connecting participants with housing and jobs, Back on My Feet is founded on the notion that running can change a person's self-image. Early morning exercise, three days a week, provides an outlet for pent-up emotions and starts to change the way someone thinks about hard work.

If the concept seems hokey or contrived, the program's numbers show that's not the case. Back on My Feet's program has reached 5,200 homeless individuals. They show up voluntarily for four out of every five runs — an 82.8 percent attendance rate. More than 1,900 have obtained employment, and 1,300 have moved into independent housing.

Jerry, a Back on My Feet alum, ran regularly with Team Uptown, while being assisted by The Fortune Society, which helps the formerly incarcerated re-enter society. Now at his own place in Harlem, he occasionally runs with Team Bowery North, Aug. 7, 2015.Chantal

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Back on My Feet began in Philadelphia in 2007, on one of Anne Mahlum's morning runs. A 26-year-old social entrepreneur with short bleach-blond hair, Mahlum started running a decade earlier, at age 16, to help cope with her father's serious gambling addiction. Running as a teen in the City of Brotherly Love, she continually passed by a group of homeless men outside the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission, near City Hall's century-old white tower. In May 2007, she began to develop a friendship with them. By July, they started running with her.

Inspired, Mahlum convinced the Rescue Mission's staff to let her form an official running club for men in the shelter. At first, nine guys signed up. In exchange, each received a brand-new, donated pair of running shoes, clothes and socks. Mahlum had only one requirement: Each person had to sign a "dedication contract," committing them to showing up on time for a run every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, respecting themselves and supporting their teammates.

Orville, the co-captain of Team Bowery North and residential member of Back on My Feet, leads a group warm-up on 115th Street before an early morning run, Aug. 7, 2015.Chantal Heijnen for NationSwell

The rules were simple, but that was the point. "If we can change the way people see themselves, can we change the direction of their lives?" Mahlum asked. In her mind, running could function as a metaphor for getting one's life back on track after experiencing homelessness. It takes the fear that someone who's experienced homelessness feels about words like "housing," "employment" and "sobriety" and turns that emotion into something manageable. Running teaches that every step forward takes you closer to that finish line, but also that you don't get to the end unless you cross every mile marker along the route. Waking up so early every morning — whether the thermometer's bubbling over or when it's frozen solid — instills discipline and responsibility in the participants. They're two valuable concepts, but both are hard to teach in the abstract. They need to be lived to be experienced.

After officially obtaining tax-exempt status, Mahlum's running club grew into a nationwide organization with 50 employees and a $6.5 million operating budget. Today, Back on My Feet has more than 50 chapters in 11 cities. Since the group began recording miles in January 2009, its residential members have run more than 462,000 miles.

Team Bowery North members cool down and stretch after an early morning run, Aug. 7, 2015.Chantal Heijnen for NationSwell

Jerry, another person who participated in Friday's outing, used to run with a chapter on the Upper West Side a couple years back and still occasionally runs with the East Harlem

group as an alumni member. A few years ago, while receiving assistance from the Fortune Society, a nonprofit focused on supporting successful reentry from prison, he signed up for Back on My Feet’s program. Jerry, who asked that his last name not be used, says he showed up for his first run bitter about his disappointments and distrustful of other people. He didn’t understand why everyone in this group kept trying to hug him or why they kept saying that no one runs alone. The first mile was painful: He felt out of breath, partially because of medication he was taking and partially, he worried, because he was permanently out of shape.

But Jerry stuck with it. Despite a criminal record that meant certain employers never called him back, he landed a job as a doorman and an apartment in Harlem. He credits Back on My Feet with preparing him for success. Today, he’ll tell you that you don’t sprint at the start of a marathon, and you don’t try to win first place either. There’s accomplishment enough, he says, in finishing.

Ryan cools down after a run with Back on My Feet's uptown group. He has been running with the organization's Team Bowery Mission for about seven months and considers the sport “almost spiritual," Aug. 7, 2015.
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