

Students Run LA

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Editors' Introduction

Every year, the *Anthology* devotes a chapter to one of the smaller projects that the Foundation funds. These are often innovative projects that take place in a single location and serve people in need. Many are funded through the *Local Initiative Funding Partners*, a program in which the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation collaborates with local foundations that have identified promising opportunities. Past volumes of the *Anthology* have featured chapters on an alternative high school in Albuquerque for young people with drug and alcohol problems,¹ a San Francisco project that provides care to homeless pregnant women,² the efforts of leaders in Gallup, New Mexico, to reduce drinking in that city,³ and a project in Chicago that takes a public health approach to reducing gun violence.⁴

This volume highlights Students Run LA, a project that gives at-risk Los Angeles students the chance to compete in the City of Los Angeles Marathon. Participating students work toward a common goal—competing in the marathon—and in the process of training for and running the event, they learn self-discipline and feel the sense of accomplishment that comes from reaching a difficult goal. Superficially, the program is about running a race; in a more profound sense, it is about building character. More than 16,000 students have run the Los Angeles Marathon. As the chapter's author, award-winning journalist Paul Brodeur, observes, the graduation rate of those students far exceeds the graduation rate for students in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation was not involved at the beginning of Students Run LA, which, as often happens, resulted from the efforts of caring and charismatic individuals. Through the Local Initiative Funding Partners program, the Foundation was able to play a role in extending the program, which had previously been limited to high schools, to middle schools throughout the city. The staff of the Local Initiative program judged Students Run LA to be so promising that a second grant was awarded to enable the program's directors to develop materials that could be used by other cities that picked up the idea. Philadelphia has already done so with Students Run Philly Style, which received financial support through the Local Initiative Funding Partners program.

1. Diehl, D. "Recovery High School." In *Anthology*, Vol. V (2002).

2. Diehl, D. "The Homeless Prenatal Program." In *Anthology*, Vol. VII (2004).

3. Brodeur, P. "Combating Alcohol Abuse in Northwestern New Mexico: Gallup's Fighting Back and Healthy Nations Programs." In *Anthology*, Vol. VI (2003).

4. Diehl, D. "The Chicago Gun Violence Program." In *Anthology*, Vol. VIII (2005).

6:30 A.M. on Sunday morning, October 17, 2004, in downtown Los Angeles. Some two thousand middle and high school runners from the Los Angeles Unified School District are milling about in Grand Hope Park, which is situated behind the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising between Grand Avenue and Hope Street, where two dozen yellow school buses provided by Laidlaw Transit Services have delivered them from all over the metropolitan area and its sprawling suburbs. Almost all of the runners are being drenched by a chilling rain that has swept in overnight from the Pacific, and many are wearing homemade ponchos—trash bags with holes cut out for heads and arms. In spite of the weather, enthusiasm seems undampened. Gossip and laughter are the order of the day as youngsters greet classmates and rush about to find friends and relatives who have come to watch them participate in a five-kilometer (3.1-mile) training race—the second of several monthly runs to be held in preparation for the twentieth annual twenty-six-mile-385-yard 2005 Los Angeles Marathon, which will take place in early March. Many of the young runners have picked up and donned T-shirts with pink and green lettering reading “Students Run LA”—an after-school fitness program for at-risk students that has been in operation for sixteen years. Most of them come from low-income families. Fifty-two percent are boys; 48 percent are girls. Seventy-one percent have Latino backgrounds; 12 percent are Anglo. The remainder are mostly of Asian, African American, Pacific Islander, and Native American descent.

By 8:00 A.M. the rain has stopped, the skies have begun to brighten, and teacher-coaches wearing yellow jerseys, who are also running in the upcoming race, are beginning to round up their charges. Some of the youngsters are performing stretching exercises by leaning one palm and then the other against a wall of the Institute of Design, and pulling up on the instep of the opposite ankle. Others are jogging in place. By 8:30, the runners are massed behind the starting line on Grand Street, stamping their feet and clapping their hands to chanting and music from a sound system, before listening to the national anthem sung in fine style by a large African American lady on a reviewing stand draped in red and blue bunting.

A few moments later, the start signal is given and the runners are off on a course that encompasses some two dozen city blocks. Within fifteen minutes or so, the leaders appear around a corner several hundred yards away, run down a two-block-long homestretch along Grand Street, and cross the finish line. As expected, they are the older and more experienced runners. During the next forty-five minutes, other runners round the corner and stream steadily toward the finish line. Some are striding easily, others are plodding, still others are walking, and a few have stopped moving altogether and are standing in place, heads down, hands on knees as they try to regain their strength—a dilemma not uncommon in the late stages of an early-season training race for which many participants, who have not been running during the summer, are unprepared. But there has been one electrifying moment early in the event as a tiny boy of Asian descent, who can't be more than four and a half feet tall, rounds the corner into the homestretch at a pace that attracts attention. Little legs pumping, elbows keeping time, head up, eyes looking neither right nor left, short black hair standing on end as if energized by current, this kid is *motoring!* He is putting on a finishing sprint such as no other runner has before or after him. In the two-block homestretch, he is passing dozens of runners. Runners half again as tall as he, runners whose legs he could almost pass between, runners who look at him as if

they can't believe how fast he's going. Spectators near the finish line have seen him coming and they are shouting and applauding. At the line, he raises his arms and disappears into the crowd. Some minutes later, he can be seen squatting on his heels by a wall of the Institute of Design, head down, elbows on knees as he regains his breath. A man—father or older brother?—kneels beside him, puts an arm around his shoulder, says something into his ear.

The boy nods, raises his head, smiles a smile of triumph.

A Pioneer

The Los Angeles Marathon celebrated its twentieth anniversary in March 2005, and students from Los Angeles schools have been running in it since 1987. That they have been doing so is to the credit of a man named Harry Shabazian, who has been a social studies teacher at the Boyle Heights Continuation High School in East Los Angeles for twenty-one years. (Continuation schools have been established throughout California to enable at-risk students who have fallen behind in their credits for one reason or another—usually poor attendance or getting into trouble—to work largely one-on-one with teachers in order to master the basic skills of reading and writing by completing a curriculum of written assignments.) A swarthy, mustachioed, and heavily bearded man of Armenian descent, Shabazian was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, spent part of his early childhood in Beirut, Lebanon, and came to the United States at the age of nine, in 1968, when his family settled in the Hollywood section of Los Angeles. He attended Hollywood High School and California State University, Northridge, where he got his teaching credentials. His position at the Boyle Heights Continuation High School—a pair of stucco-coated concrete bungalows—has been his first and only paid teaching job. The walls of his classroom are covered with photographs of student runners, as well as signs with warnings, such as “Do Drugs? Stay Stupid,” and graphic photographs showing birth-deformed babies born to teenage mothers who have become addicted to drugs.

A few days before the five-kilometer training race, Shabazian can be heard handing out tough love to a boy and a girl who have been skipping classes. “I know what you're up to,” he tells them, with a scowl. “You think you can beat the system, but let me tell you, all you're going to beat is yourselves. So let's do ourselves a favor, come to class, and get the work done!” He is wearing a blue baseball cap, blue shorts, sandals, and a white T-shirt emblazoned on the back with a shark swimming among baitfish. When he sits down to talk, he is blunt, voluble, and exuberant as he remembers his early days at Boyle Heights.

I knew this was going to be a rough place from the get-go. It was full of tough kids who'd been kicked out of other high schools. The two teachers before me had quit in frustration. I was only twenty-five, and most of the kids I was trying to teach were seventeen—not all that much of an age difference. Right off the bat, I changed my name to Harry. My real name is Hachick, which means “Little Cross,” after my grandfather, who was called Hach, or “Big Cross.” But I knew I'd never make it with the kids here if they had to call me Hachick, so I called myself Harry, after a high school history teacher who'd been a mentor of mine. One reason I was able to bond with the kids was that, like most of them—95 percent of whom are of Latino origin—I also had to learn English as a second language. Another reason was that I connected early on with a street-wise kid named Richard. In the mornings, I was Richard's teacher; in the afternoons, I was his

pupil. Richard clued me in on the gang scene in East LA, and it was largely because of him that I was able to convince the other students I was not some kind of cop.

Shabazian goes on to say that three weeks before the 1986 marathon he and two friends decided on the spur of the moment to enter it and try to finish. “My colleagues and I had trained for the race with only a ten-mile run, so we were ill-prepared,” he recalls.

By mile fifteen, the euphoria had worn off and I had begun to develop cramps and aches in body parts I didn’t even know I had. At that point, I didn’t think I could go on. Sweat was turning into salt on my face, and I felt almost delirious. But word had got out around school that we were going to run the marathon, so a bunch of kids had come out to watch, and when the downed runner bus—that’s a vehicle marathon officials send around to pick up runners who can’t continue—slowed down behind me, as if to take me on board, I took a look at the discouraged faces of the people inside and somehow got myself up and running again. It took me four hours and forty-five minutes to cross the finish line, but when I did someone handed me a metal celebration coin that looked like a laundry token, and suddenly I felt a wonderful sense of accomplishment. When I came to school the next day, I could barely walk, but my kids were incredibly excited. All they wanted to talk about was the marathon.

Toward the end of that year, one of Shabazian’s students asked him if he was going to run the marathon again. “To be truthful, it had been such a painful experience I hadn’t thought about it much,” he recalls with a grin.

Then it occurred to me that it would be great if I could persuade some of the kids to do it with me. Finally, two girls and five boys signed up for the 1987 marathon. What motivated them was that I was going to do it with them. I was not remotely qualified to be a running coach, of course, and totally uncertain about how we should train, so I read a bunch of running magazines and we wound up running a bunch of preparation races. As things turned out, minors below the age of eighteen were not allowed to run in the marathon, so we had to fudge their ages in the entry papers. We held a car wash to pay for the entry fees and for cheap running shoes that cost about twenty bucks a pair. In the end, six of my seven kids finished the marathon. A girl who had to quit had been so excited at the prospect she’d gone out to celebrate the night before, didn’t get home till after midnight, couldn’t sleep, and was forced to drop out at mile seven. I stayed with her till the end and then caught up with the others at mile seventeen, where the toughest part of the marathon begins. We went on as a group and finished together. Running as a group is very important. It gives everyone the mental strength to continue. As for the kids who finished that year and in following years, there has been an extraordinary benefit. They have a totally different view about school and what they are expected to accomplish here. Their attendance and grades improve remarkably. They set goals for themselves. They graduate. They go to college. I tell them there are more millionaires in the U.S.A. than people who have finished the marathon. For all I know, that may not be true, but they love to hear it.

Shabazian gives a booming laugh as he remembers this possibly dubious exhortation and the fact that the number of students from Boyle Heights who finished the marathon was six in 1987 and twelve the following year and eighteen in 1989.

I ran fifteen consecutive marathons with kids from my school, and by the time I quit almost all of them were crossing the finish line. Now that I reflect back on those years, I realize that the real transformation in these young people takes place during the months of training, when they are setting the goal of running the marathon and preparing to do it. Nowadays, we’re taking

students as young as fifth-graders to climb Mount Whitney in the Sierras, which at fifteen thousand feet is the highest in the continental United States. Back in 1995, we took twenty students to meet Sir Edmund Hillary, who was in the U.S. to promote mountain climbing and the preservation of the Himalayas. Everyone wants to be recognized in this life, and it means a lot to these kids, who often come from poverty and broken homes, to know that they can run the marathon, climb tall mountains, meet icons such as Hillary, and be watched, talked about, and written about.

Shabazian falls silent a moment before continuing. “Of course, one shouldn’t take things too seriously,” he says. “I’ll be running the 2005 marathon with some former students. We plan to stop off at a McDonald’s in the middle of the race so we can have a breather and a sugar rush from apple pie, French fries, and a soda.”

The Development of Students Run LA

If Shabazian deserves credit for the brainstorm that led to Students Run LA, two other teachers—Paul Trapani and Eric Spears—should be credited with demonstrating how to raise money and obtain media coverage for a student running program that could be spread to other schools. At the time, Trapani and Spears were working at the Aliso Continuation High School (which was renamed John R. Wooden High School in 2005) in the San Fernando Valley. When the two men read about what Shabazian and his students had done in a school district newsletter, they decided to follow suit, and in 1989 they ran the marathon with some of their students. Since then, they have run many more Los Angeles marathons with their charges—Trapani has run seven and Spears has run seventeen—and today both of them are coordinators of the Students Run LA program, with the task of providing guidance and assistance to the 250 teacher-leaders who coach runners in more than 150 schools that now participate in the program. They are helped in this endeavor by Jim Fiorenza, a volunteer transportation coordinator, who makes sure that during each month of the training season more than two thousand student runners will be transported on time to the scheduled events. In addition, they are assisted by an administrative staff led by Marsha Charney, executive director of Students Run LA, Rosny Mandell, assistant director, Nikki Carelli, program director, and Ginny Gibbs, development director. These women manage the day-to-day details of the program, secure funding and resources, set policy, and provide support to the individual leaders, such as making sure that running shoes, shorts, and T-shirts are available to be picked up by teacher-leaders so they can be delivered on time to student runners in the vast Los Angeles metropolitan area.

Paul Trapani is a husky, handsome man in his early forties who has an easy smile and an affable manner. He earned his teaching degree at California State University, Northridge, and has been a social studies teacher at the Aliso Continuation High School since 1986. “When I heard about what Harry Shabazian had done with his kids, I knew it was something we should be doing here,” he said a few days after the ten-kilometer training run.

I got my colleague Eric Spears involved, and over time we managed to erect a structure around Harry’s initial accomplishment by persuading officials of the school district, the marathon, and a wide variety of foundations, businesses, and organizations to give us their support. During our first year, a \$2 thousand grant (the first of two such grants) from an auto insurer, Safeco, paid for weekend race fees so our students could join other members of the running community who

were training for the 1988 marathon. The following year, a \$35 thousand grant from the Milken Family Foundation paid for running shoes, shorts, T-shirts, transportation, and other expenses for the overall program. The kids had already got into the act by contacting various television stations. As a result, Channel 2 covered a pre-race carb dinner prepared by my mother, and then followed a tiny Latina girl named Sylvia as she ran the 1989 marathon the following day.

Trapani went on to say that as the Students Run LA program expanded during the 1990s, an ever-increasing amount of time had to be reserved for making up rosters. He recalled:

Fortunately, we were able to find someone who showed us how to integrate the rosters and other aspects of the program online. For that reason, we are now able to devote more effort to the all-important business of training and mentoring our student runners, and encouraging them to set and carry out short- and long-term goals. What we celebrate most in this program is perseverance. Some of our kids finish the marathon in four to five hours. Others may take six to seven hours. Still others may require eight hours or more to struggle past the finish line. But almost all of them finish. Imagine being that determined!

Eric Spears is a slender, soft-spoken, and bearded man, who wears his long hair in a ponytail. He remembers that when Paul Trapani and he decided to try to emulate what Harry Shabazian had accomplished, they went to get the advice of an expert in kinesiology (the study of muscles) at California State University, Northridge, who advised against it, saying he didn't think it was healthy for youngsters to run the marathon. However, Spears and Trapani decided that by training with shorter runs they could get the kids in shape, and they finally won the kinesiologist over to their point of view to the extent that he began helping them set weekly mileage goals. "We trained after school, twenty to twenty-five miles a week, and on weekends we ran on trails and bike paths in the San Fernando Valley," Spears recalls. "There were only seven of us the first year, then sixty, and after that the whole program took off."

Spears became principal of the Temescal Canyon Continuation High School in Pacific Palisades in 1994, and since 2000 he has been the principal of the Community Day School Program, which has twenty-nine sites in Greater Los Angeles that require him to do a great deal of freeway driving each day. In spite of his rigorous schedule, he remains deeply committed to and involved in Students Run LA.

I think most teachers feel a deep sense of joy when they realize that the running program is helping to change young lives. The kids who finish the marathon are no longer languishing. Discipline issues disappear. Attendance and grades improve. The main thing about the program, however, is that it's not really about running. It's about setting goals—short-term goals such as running the marathon, and long-term goals such as attending college—and developing the sense of pride and accomplishment that comes with setting and achieving goals. The program affords youngsters the experience of joining together and the opportunity of building character. Believe me, it is very empowering for the kids who participate in it.

A year after Trapani, Spears, and their students ran their first marathon, Roberta Weintraub, a former president of the Los Angeles Unified School District's Board of Education, as well as a three-time elected member of the board, became interested in the fledgling movement. Thanks largely to her

efforts, officials of the Los Angeles Marathon waived their previous prohibition preventing students under the age of eighteen from running in the marathon, as well as the entry fee for Students Run LA runners. In addition, Weintraub persuaded the board to designate Students Run LA as an approved program, and was thus instrumental in spreading it districtwide. Since then, enrollment in and support for the program has increased by leaps and bounds. More than 250 student runners entered the marathon in 1990, and 235 finished it; 450 entered in 1991, and 426 finished; 651 entered in 1992, and 625 finished; and 1,026 entered in 1993, and 996 finished. During that year, Students Run LA became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Meanwhile, Laidlaw Transit Services made an extraordinary and continuing in-kind donation of all the school buses needed for the program.

By 2004, membership in Students Run LA had doubled, with more than two thousand students starting the marathon and 98 percent of them finishing it. Ninety-seven percent of the seniors who completed the marathon that year graduated, and 90 percent of those went on to attend college and other postsecondary educational institutions. Since Students Run LA was started in 1989, more than 16,000 student runners have completed the Los Angeles Marathon. The average graduation rate is more than 90 percent, as compared with a 65 percent graduation rate for students in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

During the sixteen years since Students Run LA came into being, donations and grants have poured in from various private foundations, corporations, and other organizations to foot the bill for the monthly races that student runners participate in as part of their six-month training regimen. (In addition to a one-mile preliminary race in September and the five-kilometer race in October, the training program includes a ten-kilometer [6.2-mile] run, a fifteen-kilometer [9.3-mile] run, two half-marathons, and a grueling thirty-kilometer [eighteen-mile] race that is held in early February at Hansen Dam in Lake View Terrace, north of the city. Foundation and corporate grants are also used to finance a scholarship and minigrant program. Through this program, Students Run LA provides \$500 scholarships to graduating seniors who have completed the marathon, maintained at least a 2.5 grade point average, and demonstrated financial need. The scholarships help students who attend college to pay for books, tuition, and other expenses. The minigrants are awards of up to \$300 given to youngsters in grades six through eleven who have completed the marathon and demonstrated financial need. They are used to pay for SAT preparation courses, art classes, math or science programs, and other educational activities. Still other foundation and corporate grants are used to finance special events, such as an annual Girls Day, which has increased female participation in Students Run LA from 37 percent to 48 percent during the past seven years, and an annual leader training conference, which enables the program's volunteer teacher-leaders to meet one another and share experiences and information. Among the major sponsors of these and other Students Run LA activities are the American Honda Motor Company, the California Wellness Foundation, the Los Angeles Police Department, the *Los Angeles Times*, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the California Endowment, the Amateur Athletic Foundation, the Ahmanson Foundation, the Weingart Foundation, the S. Mark Taper Foundation, and the W.M. Keck Foundation.

The Initial Role of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

In 1987, thanks largely to the vision and tenacity of Terrance Keenan, then a vice president at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Foundation created the Local Initiative Funding Partners program, or LIFP, to encourage partnerships with smaller foundations that, like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, fund projects in the area of health and health care. Local Initiative Funding Partners is a program of matching grants designed to support collaborative relationships between the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and local grantmakers that finance innovative community-based projects that serve people who are underserved and at risk. The philosophy guiding the program is the belief that local grantmakers interested in addressing local health care problems have a knowledge of their communities that no national foundation can match.¹

Between 1988 and the end of 2004, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has collaborated through its Local Initiative Funding Partners Program with more than 1,200 local grantmakers to fund 250 projects in all fifty states. During this period, the Foundation has awarded \$86 million in LIFP grants that have been matched by funds from local granting coalitions, such as community foundations, family foundations, corporate grantmakers, and others. Local Initiative Funding Partners grants of between \$100,000 and \$500,000 per project are paid out over a three- to four-year period, and are awarded through a competitive process that begins when a local grantmaker prepares a letter of nomination recommending a local applicant's project, and when the local applicant submits a brief proposal describing the project, together with a one-page preliminary budget. Selected applicants are then invited to submit full proposals, which are reviewed by members of an advisory committee and by the LIFP's program staff. After this review, projects still under consideration receive site visits. By the time of a site visit, there must be clear evidence that matching funds will be in place for the first year, and that local funding sources for subsequent years have been identified.

In September 1997, Gary Yates, president and chief executive officer of the California Wellness Foundation—a longtime supporter of Students Run LA—wrote to Pauline M. Seitz, a former senior program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, who had become director of the Foundation's Local Initiative Funding Partners program, nominating Students Run LA for funding through the Local Initiative program. "We believe that Students Run LA represents an innovative and effective approach to promoting health and preventing substance abuse among youth, including low-income, special needs, and high-risk students," Yates told Seitz. Some idea of the need for such an approach can be seen in the narrative section of a proposal entitled "Students Run LA Middle School Campaign," which Students Run LA's Marsha Charney sent to Seitz on December 10, 1997. Citing a report called *Children's ScoreCard Los Angeles County 1996*, Charney wrote that 28 percent of the 2,577,819 children in Los Angeles County lived below the poverty level. Citing statistics furnished by the Los Angeles Police Department, she went on to point out that as of January 1996, there were 58,659 gang members in Los Angeles County, whose primary activity involved the use and sale of drugs. According to the Los Angeles Police Department, the average age of a gang member was sixteen; most had joined a gang by the age of twelve; 90 percent had been arrested at least once by the age of eighteen; 95 percent did not finish high school; and 60 percent were either dead or in prison by the age of twenty.

After considering the Students Run LA application for funding, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, through the Local Initiative program, made a grant of \$235,000 in July 1998 for a three-year program that would increase the ranks of student runners to include middle school students between the ages of twelve and fifteen. At the time, the Foundation had not yet embarked on grant-making to address obesity and physical fitness (in which it has since developed a strong interest), so the program was based on the expectation that training for and running in the marathon would encourage middle school students to build self-esteem, improve nutrition, and avoid the use of tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs. In addition to the California Wellness Foundation, local funding partners in the project included the California Community Foundation, the Milken Family Foundation, the Crail-Johnson Foundation, the Bank of America Foundation, the Ralph M. Parsons Foundation, and the Los Angeles Junior Chamber of Commerce.

The initial involvement of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with Students Run LA proved to be a great success. During the project, which ran from the beginning of August 1998 until the end of July 2001, more than 1,000 middle school students were enrolled in Students Run LA's marathon-running program. "All we had to do was put the word out," Martha Charney recalls. "The middle schools were already knocking on our door. What we had to be careful about was not to push the younger students too hard or too far. In many instances, therefore, we allowed them to set the half-marathon as their goal during their first year in the program, and to continue in the full-marathon project during the following year."

Replicating Students Run LA

In June 2002, Pauline Seitz telephoned Marsha Charney to get her thoughts on the possibility of nationwide replication. Charney told Seitz that she felt Students Run LA did not have the organizational infrastructure needed for national replication, but that she and her colleagues would be interested in exploring a special opportunities grant to describe the program experience, evaluate the results to date, and describe the lessons learned in going from a \$35-thousand-a-year project to a \$1-million-a-year nonprofit. Seitz and Charney then discussed the need for a Students Run LA "toolkit"—a package of instructional materials that local communities interested in starting similar marathon-running programs could adapt.

In January 2003, Charney sent Seitz a six-page proposal entitled "Replication of the Students Run LA Program," in which she listed ten "ingredients" that she and her colleagues had identified as necessary to operate and sustain a student marathon-running project. She described the first two as "essential, critical, irreplaceable, and non-negotiable." The ten ingredients can be summarized as follows:

- One or a few enthusiastic, energetic, and passionate teacher-leaders who are committed to helping at-risk young people become strong, resilient, motivated students, and who are interested in training for and running in a marathon themselves.
- Students aged twelve to nineteen who are willing to try out the concept.
- School principals who will support the use of school facilities for the teacher-leaders and students to train before and/or after school, and who understand and support the essential

goal of the program, which is to teach at-risk youth how to set a goal and achieve it through participation in and completion of a marathon.

- A member or members of the board of education who will not only understand and be advocates for the running program but also provide the imprimatur and resources of the board, which may include funding, insurance, access to transportation, and acceptance as a bona fide activity.
- The leader of the local city marathon, who will accept and support the program, and who will be willing to waive any age or time requirements of that particular marathon.
- A board of directors to help the new organization gain access to the community and acquire resources. Board members should include those with access to government, philanthropies, corporations, health care agencies, and other community agencies and resources.
- A director to administer the program, oversee the staff and budget, develop informational materials, and send out proposals to raise money for the program.
- Sponsors to provide funds and/or products to outfit the initial group of students, who will need good-quality running shoes to train properly.
- Local community races that teacher-leaders and student runners can enter during their training period.
- Local political supporters to help the organization put on its own races (with permits, access, police assistance) and to help with resources at all levels of government.

In her proposal to Seitz, Charney went on to describe a toolkit that would include information on the “who, what, when, where, and why” of creating a student marathon-running program, including descriptions of the Students Run LA philosophy, program structure, seasonal time frame, program costs, strategies for implementation, insurance and liability issues, adult and student responsibilities, evaluation criteria, training for adult leaders, staffing needs, and other essential information. Among the chief components of the package would be a teacher-leader manual explaining how to start a student running group, and what training techniques and schedule to employ; a video describing the experiences and observations of student runners and their teacher-leaders; and a runner’s journal and training log that students could use each year while they participate in the program.

In July 2003, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded a \$250,000 grant to Students Run LA for a two-year project during which it would develop an instructional package that would be used to teach other communities how to organize and replicate the Students Run LA program. Development of the toolkit began on August 1, 2003, under the direction of Kristine S. Breese, Student Run LA’s project director, who proceeded to review the organization’s written materials, hire graphics design personnel, and consult with teacher-leaders to evaluate, modify, and improve a prototype kit. A final model of the toolkit was produced in November 2004, and during 2005 a business plan was developed to determine the essential market for it and the best way to disseminate it. Meanwhile, Students Run LA officials had received inquiries about the toolkit from more than half a dozen cities interested in acquiring it.

The major component of the kit is a brightly colored notebook entitled “Up and Running,” which contains well over a hundred pages of instruction on how to start up a marathon-running program, how to train, and how to build confidence, endurance, and self-esteem. The notebook also provides

a marathon leaders' handbook that advises teacher-leaders on how to motivate and train young runners. In addition to the notebook, the toolkit contains a video that features Trapani, Spears, Charney, and a number of students talking about the value and success of Students Run LA, as well as a 124-page runner's journal that lists training, nutritional, and safety tips for young runners.

Students Run Philly Style

In February 2003, Susan Sherman, president and chief executive officer of the Independence Foundation of Philadelphia, visited Students Run LA while attending an annual Grantmakers in Health meeting that was being held in Los Angeles. Impressed by the achievements of the program, she recommended it for consideration by the National Nursing Centers Consortium of Philadelphia—a nonprofit organization with 140 nurse-managed health centers serving two million patients across the United States, including twelve centers located in Philadelphia. Nursing Consortium officials were enthusiastic about the prospect of replicating Students Run LA in Philadelphia, and on November 4, 2003, Sherman wrote Pauline Seitz a letter nominating the organization as a candidate for funding by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Local Initiative Funding Partners program, and committing the Independence Foundation to providing \$50,000 a year if the project were approved.

In an executive summary describing the project, which was to be called Students Run Philly Style, Nursing Consortium officials proposed a three-year funding period to create opportunities for up to 400 middle and high school students to participate in a running program that would “improve their health knowledge and behaviors, self-esteem, attitudes about school, and school attendance.” In the project narrative, the Consortium officials wrote that 67 percent of the target area's children were African American, 16 percent were Latino, and 15 percent white; that 45 percent of them lived below the federal poverty level; and that 60 percent—18,300 children in all—were at risk of obesity. They also noted that between 2001 and 2002, only 54 percent of Philadelphia students graduated on time (in four years), that more than one in five Philadelphia ninth-graders dropped out of school each year, and that the daily absence rate for high school students was nearly 22 percent.

According to the proposal, the project would initially be implemented in collaboration with two Nursing Consortium centers—the Falls Family Practice and Counseling Network and the Temple Health Connection—which provide vital community health care to low-income, predominately minority populations of eight public housing developments. The two health centers would, in turn, be supported by a variety of organizations—among them the Temple University Partnership Schools, the School District of Philadelphia, the City of Philadelphia Department of Public Health, the Philadelphia Health Management Corporation, the Delaware County Road Runners Club, Students Run LA, and several middle and high schools in North Philadelphia, perhaps the poorest area in the city. During the initial stages of Students Run Philly Style, team leaders would be recruited from neighborhood schools, health centers, and running clubs, and the program would be confined to North Philadelphia. The initial plans called for the program to be expanded to West Philadelphia in the second and third years. However, when a health collaborative in Haddington called To Our Children's Future with Health became a partner, West Philadelphia was included as well. In addition to the Independence Foundation, the local funding partners included the William Penn Foundation,

the Philadelphia Foundation, the Philadelphia Health Management Corporation, the Campbell-Oxholm Foundation, the Samuel S. Fels Fund, the Beck Institute for Cognitive Therapy and Research, and the Keystone Mercy Health Plan.

In July 2004, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, through the Local Initiative Funding Partners program, awarded a four-year, \$495,000 grant to the National Nursing Centers Consortium to undertake the first full-scale replication of the Students Run LA program. However, instead of being a completely school-based program like Students Run LA, Students Run Philly Style has drawn its student runners and adult leaders from a variety of sources—among them support groups for youth, health centers, churches, and after-school programs, as well as several schools. This approach is largely due to the fact that the Philadelphia Marathon is run in November, which means that students who wish to compete in it must train from March to November, including several months during the summer when schools are closed for vacation. Among the races they have entered during their training period are the ten-mile Blue Cross Broad Street Run, held in May, and the 13.1-mile Jefferson Hospital Philadelphia Distance Run, which takes place in September.

During the winter of 2005, Heather McDanel, a long-distance runner who is project director of Students Run Philly Style, and some colleagues undertook to organize the program in earnest, and on Saturday, March 12, seventy-five young runners and thirty-five leaders, who were joined by Eric Spears, Paul Trapani, four-time Olympic middle distance runner Joetta Clark-Diggs, and Pedro Larios, a member of Students Run LA, met for a kickoff celebration that included a twenty-minute Run for Fun along Kelly Drive, along the Schuylkill River. Since then, thirty adult mentors—among them an advocate for the homeless, a Germantown pastor, a Trinidadian soccer player, a school police officer, several running enthusiasts, and some college students—have been paired with groups of eight to ten teenagers with whom they practice at least three times a week, before embarking upon a long run each weekend. Students Run Philly Style is open to students aged twelve to eighteen. Those fifteen and older are trained to run in the marathon, while younger students are trained to run the event as part of four-member relay teams or in the eight-kilometer run associated with the marathon.

The 2005 Los Angeles Marathon

Meanwhile, the twentieth annual running of the Los Angeles Marathon was held on Sunday, March 6, under clear skies and relatively cool temperatures. More than 25,000 runners competed, of whom 2,250 were members of Students Run LA, including some 700 middle school students whose entry into the marathon had been facilitated by the 1998 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Local Initiative program. A few days before the race, eight of these young runners—all between the ages of eleven and thirteen, and all from Latino backgrounds—gathered in the classroom of thirty-two-year-old Tommy Munoz, their coach and mentor, who has been a sixth-grade history teacher at the Hollenbeck Middle School for five years, and who would be entering the 2005 marathon with fourteen Hollenbeck students. (Hollenbeck, in East Los Angeles, is in the same complex of schools that houses Roosevelt Senior High School and the Boyle Heights Continuation High School.) The eight students—Jessica, Juan, Mireya, Jennifer, Elizabeth, Madeline, Oscar, and Marlene—had trained in arduous conditions; several of the races were run in the cold rain or drizzle that had characterized much of California's winter weather. Most of them agreed, however, that the

most difficult race of all was the half marathon that had been held at Newport in December, after a scheduled race at Malibu had been cancelled for lack of permits.

“It poured rain the whole way,” Jessica said. “My body was numb.”

“My knuckles were white,” Oscar said.

“Mine were purple,” Jennifer chimed in.

Madeline nodded in agreement. “My hands were swollen.”

Elizabeth, a veteran thirteen-year-old runner who had already entered and finished two marathons, smiled a shy smile. “I’m hoping to better my time this year,” she announced.

On marathon morning, the 2,250 runners participating in Students Run LA gathered in subterranean ballrooms of the Wilshire Grand Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, where they were issued bright pink caps, T-shirts, and numbered placards. By 7:45 A.M. they had massed behind the starting line at Figueroa and Sixth Street, and after the wheelchair contestants and a select group of top women runners had been allowed to start early, the main race began shortly after 8:00 A.M. preceded by the sound of klaxon horns and the roar of motorcycles ridden by white-helmeted cops of the Los Angeles Police Department. Since slower runners were positioned at the back of the pack, few pink hats were seen during the first fifteen minutes, but by 8:20 they were everywhere in the stream of runners flowing twenty abreast along the four lanes of Figueroa.

The day heated up as the sun rose higher in the sky, and by noontime, when the first student runners began crossing the finish line, the temperature had climbed into the seventies. To afford relief, a fire truck was hosing down tired runners, who were wearing orange ribbons and medals around their necks to signify that they had finished the marathon. Some of the adult runners were limping, some were holding their backs, and a few were being taken away in wheelchairs. As for the Students Run LA members, there were many more smiles than grimaces, many high fives, and much photographing and hugging by proud parents, family members, and friends. In the end, all fourteen of the Hollenbeck Middle School kids who entered the marathon finished, and fully 99 percent of the 2,250 Students Run LA members who entered also finished. Down in the ballroom of the Wilshire Grand, where hundreds of young finishers were stoking up on a post-race lunch of pasta and macaroni, there was a deafening roar of celebratory chatter.

Elizabeth was ecstatic. She had run the marathon in six hours and five minutes—her best time ever.

Conclusion

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation made a significant contribution to an already successful program when it financed the entry of middle school students into the Los Angeles Marathon between 1998 and 2001. Since then, the Foundation has undertaken to encourage student marathon running at other locations by funding the writing of a toolkit designed to demonstrate how Los Angeles developed its program, and by financing a full-scale replication of the Students Run LA program in Philadelphia. One of the main ingredients of the success of Students Run LA is that it is school-based, with teacher-leaders who spend time each day with their charges, and who know them on an intimate basis. The question is whether Students Run Philly Style can match the success of the Los Angeles school-based program by drawing upon adult leaders, who may not be as closely connected on a daily basis with young runners as their counterparts on the West Coast. Only time will tell.

Notes

1. For a fuller description, see Wielawski, I. M. "The Local Initiative Funding Partners Program." *To Improve Health and Health Care 2000: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Anthology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.