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SPORTS

Running with Multiple Sclerosis: Gayle Alderfer Fisher prepares for Boston Marathon



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STAUNTON — Jim Williams will be running his 13th Boston Marathon on Monday, April 15. The chief of police in Staunton has run marathons all over the world, but there's something special about Boston, which he has run for the last 10 years in a row.

Gayle Alderfer Fisher is also running Boston this year, but it will be the first for the Staunton woman. It will be only the second marathon she's ever run, the first coming in Philadelphia in November, 2022. The Philly race was where Alderfer Fisher qualified for Boston.

"That was my goal," she said. "I didn't know how many of these I had in me."

In addition to just running, both will be raising money for the National MS Society. It's an organization that has special significance to Alderfer Fisher.

In the early 1990s, during a stressful time in her life, Alderfer Fisher first noticed the symptoms of Multiple Sclerosis, a disease that impacts the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves, which make up the central nervous system. It can cause unpredictable symptoms such as numbness, tingling, mood changes, memory problems, pain, fatigue, blindness and/or paralysis, although the National MS Society said everyone's experience with MS is different and these losses may be temporary or long lasting.

At the time her symptoms first appeared, the medicines to treat MS were expensive and came with lots of side effects. There wasn't much progress being made. Her neurologist was close to giving her an official diagnosis, but cautioned her that there were drawbacks to that, including possibly being dropped from her insurance. He asked her if she wanted

to take the final test for an official diagnosis.

"I looked at him and said, 'No thank you,' and left," she said. "And I left conventional medicine and radically changed the way I was living."

She changed her eating habits. She changed her exercise routine. Her sleep patterns changed. She began to meditate and practice yoga. It helped for decades.

"Then, a few years ago, I had a really bad relapse," Alderfer Fisher said. "I was in bed, having trouble supporting my head, that sort of thing."

That happened right before she was planning to run her first marathon. Alderfer Fisher called it "devastating."

Through some friends she got connected to Run a Myelin My Shoes, a group that supports one another as athletes living with Multiple Sclerosis. Myelin is a fatty substance that surrounds and insulates nerve fibers. MS can damage or destroy myelin.

Alderfer Fisher said people at all different levels of ability are part of the group and the goal is to just do what you can and never give up.

"It brought me through when I wasn't sure if I would ever be able to run again," she said.

Alderfer Fisher said the medical theory years ago was that physical exercise like running might do more damage to those with MS, but in recent years it's been shown exercise can help. She finds that when she can't run for whatever reason, her symptoms get worse.

"It is not only something I love to do," she said. "But something that improved my health."

Little by little she worked back to a point where she thought a marathon was possible. She finally did that marathon in Philadelphia. Now, this month, it will be Boston.

Williams knows raising money for organizations like the National MS Society helps fund good work. He has raised money by running in the past, mostly for cancer research. His late wife, Becky Williams, was diagnosed with multiple myeloma and lived with cancer for eight years before passing away in late 2016.

"I believe in all these causes," Williams said. "The stuff they were able to do, watching the progression of care through Becky's eight years of dealing with that illness was really amazing. The drugs that came out just in that time ... there's not a lot of funding for that stuff. So I think it's really, really important."

Williams had run some 5Ks before Becky's illness, but it was during her treatment that he found a love of long distance running. It helped clear his mind during a difficult period.

He ran his first half marathon in 2009 at the age of 46 and his first marathon a year later in Athens, Greece. He ran a marathon in Tokyo in early 2017, shortly after Becky died. He had promised her he wouldn't miss the race.

Not only does Williams understand the importance of fundraising for medical causes, but the importance of running for one's own physical and mental health.

When he met Alderfer Fisher and heard her story, he asked if she had ever done any fundraising. She isn't a fan of asking people for money, but with Williams' encouragement she agreed to raise money for the National MS Society through the Run a Myelin My Shoes team. Williams is doing the same.

"I'm just running, it's easy," Williams said. "She's the champion."

Fundraising links:

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