

# racing toward hope

WHEN I STARTED RUNNING, I WASN'T CONCERNED ABOUT THE CAUSE I WAS SUPPORTING.

AND THEN THAT CAUSE HIT HOME. ○ BY EVELYN SPENCE

All my life, I've been somewhat athletic, but not the obsessive type who wakes at 5 AM to run, logs mileage in a diary, or wears a heart-rate monitor. My ventures into health and fitness consisted of playing soccer and skiing—and trying softball, rowing, track, and volleyball. I gave a go at almost every sport. But training wasn't a part of the plan. Nor was endurance. Or pain.

I'm not sure why then, a few years ago, I decided to try running a four-hour-long race. My best guess is that I simply wanted to prove to myself that I could. I might not be competitive, but I was always ambitious.

Since I knew nothing about preparing for a 26.2-mile run—20 miles more than I'd ever run—I hooked up with the Team In Training (TNT), a troupe of selfless regular folks who pound the pavement in purple tank tops to find a cure for blood-related cancers. They'd tell me when to run 5 miles and when to run 15. They'd give me intervals. They'd line up TNT support people along the race course to cheer me on.

According to The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, 9,730 people in the U.S. each year learn that they have chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL). And although I raised \$2,600 in my first marathon, I wasn't thinking about the cause. Instead, I was thinking about how I could get help for *me*—how *I* could prepare for and reach a goal that seemed, at the time, ridiculous.

I don't know how much my newfound running friends thought about the cause, either, even though we were raising thousands of dollars for it. We were too busy picking the best place for omelets and buckwheat pancakes after long weekend runs, too excited to walk straight to Kezar Pub for pints and fries after Thursday night track workouts. Sure, The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society set up information sessions, and we got to meet a few “real” patients. But, to be honest, my motivations were—you might venture to say—slightly misguided. Leukemia, to me, was just an abstraction.

When I ran my second marathon, I didn't even donate a penny. I mentored a group of first-timers so *they* could raise money. My

third marathon, I trained on my own, but still wore my TNT tank and welcomed the cheers of fans who thought I was still part of the cause. I loved striving for a crazy goal, building up miles, crossing the finish on floaty endorphin-flushed legs, and feeling pathetically sore for days afterward.

And although TNT—and leukemia—got me into distance running, each time I passed a mile marker, the cause was far in the back of my mind.

That all changed in 2003.

My father called late one evening and told me, evenly, that he had CLL. He explained how some of his white blood cells were defective, and these bad cells were crowding out his healthy cells. He also told me that CLL has no cure—but people often live with it for many years. I reread the letter I'd written years before to solicit donations for my race, the letter that gave stats and success rates and convinced or obligated old neighbors and former coworkers to fund me.

I tried not to contemplate the irony, the karmic twist. Back when I ran for TNT, I was truly just running for myself.

Yet I can't help but think that part of the money I donated is somehow helping my dad live longer. Three years after his diagnosis, at age 65, he's still skiing double-black-diamond runs with me and hiking all around Washington State with my mom. Three years after his diagnosis, he doesn't seem sick.

And three years after his diagnosis, I think of him each time I lace up my running shoes. I'm not training now, just putting one foot in front of the other; I'm not cajoling strangers for cash; I'm not officially attached to a cause. But somehow running feels more important and life affirming than ever—as if my every-other-daily loop is my way of saying, hey, we can beat this, Dad and me. Although I end up right back where I started, I'm racing toward hope. ●

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