

Mlive.com: "One step at a time: Mission residents train for River Bank Run, and a new chance at life"

By Ted Roelofs

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One step at a time: Mission residents train for River Bank Run, and a new chance at life

By Ted Roelofs



Rex Larsen | The Grand Rapids Press
Keep moving: Rusty Bowers, left, Garcia Nelson, front right, Ryan Kline, rear right, and John Hazebrook, rear left, all residents of Guiding Light Mission, jog along North Division Avenue recently as they train to participate in the Fifth Third River Bank Run 10K event in May.

Hope for Rusty Bowers is a single slap of a shoe on treadmill, then another, more steps than an overweight, chain-smoking drug addict imagined he could take.

"This is something I never thought in my life I would be doing. I have never run in my life," said Bowers, 45, on a mission with other homeless men to complete a 10-kilometer run at the Fifth Third River Bank Run.

For one who stands 5-foot-8 and weighs 240 pounds, it is a daunting goal. Training runs for now are about three miles on a treadmill at MVP Metro in downtown Grand Rapids. There is lots of huffing and more walking than running.

But each day Bowers puts one foot in front of the other, with five fellow residents from the Guiding Light Mission, he feels one step closer to independence and maybe another chance at life. A few months ago he was strung out on crack, and lighting one cigarette after another.

“This is so beyond me. It’s surreal.”

YOU CAN HELP

People who would like to participate in community efforts to end homelessness and increase affordable housing may contact United Way’s Volunteer Center online.

If someone would like to provide assistance for rent, they may contact the community central intake office at the Salvation Army Booth Family Services Housing Assessment Program in care of Lauren Baker, HAP Coordinator, 1120 Monroe Ave. NW Suite 250, Grand Rapids, MI 49503.

Tall and lanky John Hazebrook, 32, stands on the other end of the athletic spectrum, back to the running he remembers as member of the track and cross country teams at Hudsonville High School. He has been at the mission three months, when alcohol threatened to ruin his life.

He has discovered the joy of gliding through downtown streets, breeze in his face, the familiar glow of fatigued quadriceps and calf muscles afterward.

“It’s amazing, to be doing it just for the freedom of running. When the sun is out, I can’t wait to run. The whole mind, body and soul experience — and to do it with a whole bunch of guys who are recovering, it makes it ten times more enjoyable.”

There are many prescriptions for breaking the cycles of homelessness and the vices of addiction — from affordable housing to counseling. There is evidence running can play a role as well.

A study by Butler Hospital affiliated with Brown University in Rhode Island found outpatient treatment and 12 weeks of aerobic conditioning raised the likelihood alcoholics would remain sober. Other research has found running or other forms of aerobic exercise improves symptoms of depression.

A likely reason is the body’s release of compounds during vigorous exercise; these endorphins afford a natural sense of well-being, something also called the “runner’s high.”

At Odyssey House in New York City, recovering drug addicts have built a notable record of achievement by training for and completing the 26.2 miles of the New York City Marathon.

Some have stumbled back into addiction. But many others have managed to leave those habits behind and build productive lives.

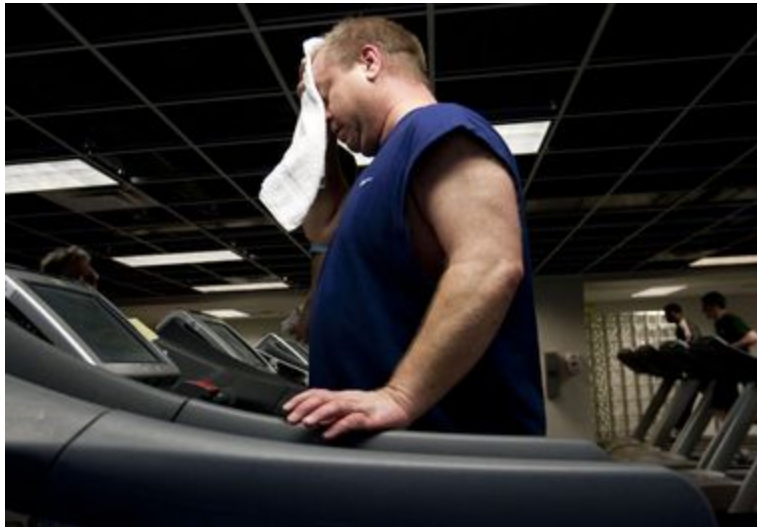
“We turn addicts into athletes,” says John Tavalacci, the chief operating officer at Odyssey House, who started the program there a decade ago. He estimated 185 addicts have completed the marathon since then.

As proof of its impact, Tavalacci said, in 2010 there were more former addicts back for their second or third marathon than there were first-time entrants.

“We are dealing with people who have hit rock bottom. It’s an amazing thing to see,” he said.

TV and radio personality Gerry Barnaby helped launch the local project when he stopped at the mission last fall to see if any men wanted to give jogging a try.

“It shows you that just because you are down and out, change can still happen,” Barnaby said. Their unofficial leader, he joins them on many of their runs.



Cory Morse | The Grand Rapids Press
A long road: Rusty Bowers uses a towel to wipe away sweat while running on a treadmill at the MVP Metro exercise gym in downtown Grand Rapids last week. Bowers, who had a history of crack use and smoking, said, "I ran three miles in my life total" before starting training for the Fifth Third River Bank Run.

A little while later, they got a name, Running for Life. They formed a partnership with In The Image, a Grand Rapids clothing and furniture charity.

That led to sponsorship by Striders athletic store in Grandville, which donated and fitted running shoes for the Guiding Light team. MVP Metro Club in downtown Grand Rapids is offering free use of the fitness club three days a week.

But as with any run, it comes down to the man in the shoes and how badly he wants to reach the finish.

SERIES: HOMELESS IN GRAND RAPIDS

Beads of perspiration trickled down the face of Garcia Nelson as he tapped out the miles at MVP with other members of the team.

“It feels good. It’s hard to understand how good it really feels. It’s better than a drug,” said Nelson, 56.

He came to the mission in November after a decades-old battle with heroin. Heroin was winning.

“I was just broken. I found myself sleeping in a car,” Nelson said.

“You lie. You steal. You manipulate. It brings you down. It gives you a sense of hopelessness. You ain’t nothing. That’s where I was in my life, close to suicide.”

With distant memories of running track in high school, Nelson would like to finish among the top two or three in the Guiding Light group.

“If I can make it here, I can make it anywhere in my life. If I just finish, it’s an accomplishment.”

For Bowers, it is a journey he makes not just for himself. He figures he owes it to his teammates, his friends and family to see this through.

“It’s amazing the accountability level you have,” he said.

Like an accountant, he rattles off a long list of what drugs took from him as he progressed from powder cocaine to crack cocaine over the course of two decades. He had a house and thriving auto vinyl and leather repair business.

“It cost me my business, my house, my dog and my motorcycle. I ended up in a motel. This has been a slow burn of a lifetime thing.”

On Dec. 13, he walked through the doors of Guiding Light Mission to join its residential treatment program.

A few weeks later, someone asked residents who wanted to join a running team.

“I raised my hand. I don’t remember doing it but it was up in the air,” he said.

He quit smoking. First time out on the treadmill, he managed just 1.5 miles. He walked it all.

“I was starting at less than zero,” he said.

He has begun to venture outdoors for short jaunts with the team as it builds for the May 14 event.

When he runs, Bowers feels like miracles are within his grasp.

The first is that he wants to do this. The second is he believes he can.

Perhaps the third will find him through that finish line, leaving the mission and jumping back into the biggest race of all.

“To even think I could do this is pretty cool. With God’s help I can, because I can’t do it alone.”