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New York's Homeless Lace Up to Change Their Lives

DONOR OF THE DAY

By Melanie Grayce West



The first step is learning how to run—literally. Self sufficiency is the second. This is the basic philosophy of the national nonprofit Back on My Feet, which trains homeless people as runners and helps them transition to an independent life and, hopefully, a job and home. This April, the organization will launch a chapter in New York City, its ninth in the country.

Anne Mahlum, 31 years old, founded the Philadelphia based organization in 2007 (other chapters exist in Chicago, Baltimore and Washington, D.C.). Her program works with established homeless shelters or transitional-living facilities to identify participants for the voluntary program. Selected members run in teams three times a week with volunteers. Attendance and attitude are tracked at the runs and, after 30 days in the program, runners receive a personalized plan and counseling to find housing and get a job.

Members receive job training and other educational opportunities and have access to a scholarship of \$2,500 to pay off fines, get tools, receive training or pay a security deposit, among other approved expenses.

The running, counseling and all-around positive environment makes participants "feel good, and proud, and excited, and respected, and valued, and cared for," says Ms. Mahlum. Key to her program is that

"you have to teach somebody that they are capable of change and that starts with how they view themselves," she says.

The idea for the nonprofit came from Ms. Mahlum's own running. Her route in Philadelphia took her past a homeless shelter where she developed a casual relationship with some of the residents. One day she decided running was a good metaphor for helping these people get out of their current situation. So she called the shelter and was soon running with the men.

Many graduates of the program go on to jobs in customer service, maintenance, truck driving, food service or construction. Others go back to school. The organization has relationships with major corporations to help people secure an interview. Marriott, for example, has hired some 20 graduates of Back on My Feet.

Participants aren't always ready for a life change. Some 25% do not make it beyond the first 30 days and another quarter drop out during the four-month to six-month program. The 50% that complete the program are motivated by the opportunity to be a part of a team and to get a fresh start, says Ms. Mahlum, though she stresses that the organization is not a "running club."

Back on My Feet will launch with 50 participants in New York and five full-time staff. The first day begins with a one-mile run through Central Park; participants will get new running clothes and shoes for the program. Ms. Mahlum, who recently moved to New York, says that she's hoped to open a New York chapter of the organization for several years, but wanted to establish a proven program model and best practices. "When you're building something and growing, you don't want to come to New York and learn lessons," says Ms. Mahlum. "We feel prepared and proud of what we've built to be able to deliver in New York."