

Run, Talk, Bond – How Marathon Training Changed Two Lives

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The New York Daily News

November 2, 2019

“OK, you got the first five miles, I’ll take the next five,” I said to Elaine as we ran the loop around San Francisco’s Lake Merced. This meant that we’d have to go around the lake twice, something we’d never done before.

As the New York City Marathon approaches, I think back to that time in 1981 when we upped our mileage — and our chatter — putting ourselves on the road to being marathoners, while working out some personal issues as well.

It’s been said that men form friendships by sharing activities, and that women form them through communicating their feelings. If that’s so, then Elaine and I are truly friends because we bonded both ways simultaneously.

We were 30-ish and healthy, able to spare an hour every day after work to run around Merced. While we ran, we talked. It made the time pass faster, and helped us sort out our lives. We’d met on the neuro ward of a large San Francisco hospital — she was the social worker, I the physical therapist. As these were high-stress positions, our runs were both physically and mentally therapeutic. We discussed work, family, social and political events, and our romantic relationships.

I suggested upping the course to 10 miles that day because Elaine had spent the first loop telling me about hearing from her former sweetheart. I hadn’t yet vented my concern about my new boyfriend, Mike, and needed another lap to do it.

“He’s Jewish,” I said, “and his mother is a Holocaust survivor — I don’t think she’s happy with me.”

I was raised Catholic, and although neither Mike nor I was religious, he was very close to his mother. Elaine, herself the daughter of Holocaust survivors, could relate.

“Don’t worry,” she said confidently. “If it becomes serious, you’ll work it out.”

The next week, after we’d gotten in 10 miles, it was Elaine’s turn to extend the run. Wondering whether to reignite her relationship with her old flame, she said, “Let’s up it to 15 miles.”

After that, that it was easy to commit to doing a marathon.

The Golden Gate Marathon was three months away in October. We’d consulted a 16-week training schedule, and were well into the mileage for the second month. We happily learned that you don’t have to complete 26.2 miles before the race, only 21 miles. At that point, presumably, your body can go the extra distance on race day.

Running over 50 miles a week takes up a lot of time. Because we both worked, our runs were relegated to the evenings. As the days got shorter, we shifted our runs of over three hours to the weekends. Yet we never wavered, despite demands put on us by others. One time, friends invited us to meet for dinner. We computed the distance from my apartment to the restaurant as seven miles, just the amount needed for that day, and ran to the bistro, chatting all the way.

On the big day, Elaine and I ran the first 21 miles together. We felt strong and our moods were elated by the endorphins triggered by the strenuous exercise. Enthusiastic spectators motivated us and bolstered our spirits. I felt that the world was ours. Elaine broke out ahead in the end, finishing five minutes before me in just over four hours.

Mike ran those last few miles with me. Quieter than Elaine, he spoke mainly to encourage me. He would eventually become my husband and together we’d run the marathon of

marriage, so far for 37 years. His mother got used to me, and yes, we worked it out as Elaine had predicted.

Elaine never married her old beau. Though 3,000 miles apart we frequently converse, still offering advice and support.

I never entered another marathon. I've come up with lots of excuses: raising a family, working long hours, taking classes. But the main reason was I didn't have Elaine to talk me through the grueling training period. The health benefits of long distance running are indisputable. But the bonds created by sharing our feelings were, for me, the healthiest part. We could talk for miles.

