

Marathon Ministry Turns Couch Potatoes Into Runners

In a few weeks Mark Simpson will lace up his sneakers, set out some five-gallon water coolers, and start waiting for a miracle.

Over the past 10 years, Simpson, a 47-year old pastoral counselor from Clinton, Miss., and his wife, Robin, have helped train more than 3,000 people to run a marathon.

Most, like Simpson, were couch potatoes before they started.

They learned to run using a method that's part fitness class, part prayer circle and part support group, concerned as much with spiritual transformation as physical fitness.

"We have just hauled water and we have encouraged runners—and it has changed lives," said Simpson.

He began running back in 2003 on a whim.

Simpson had a friend who was a marathoner who was complaining that few Southerners ran marathons. The friend said he could teach almost anyone how to run a marathon if they were willing. Simpson took him up on the offer, and asked his wife if she wanted to try as well.

"I went home and said, 'Baby, why don't you run a marathon with me?'" said Simpson.

They eventually convinced 20 friends—none of whom had run a marathon before—to join them. They began with a few weeks of meetings to go over the basics of stretching and proper nutrition. Then they started walking or running on a daily basis, first for short distances and then gradually working their way up.

Forty weeks later, they all finished the Chicago Marathon.

“When you are running the Chicago Marathon and there are 40,000 people running and a million people cheering you on, including your friends and family, that will change your life,” Simpson said.

Every year since, the Simpsons have invited more people to train with them and eventually founded a company called Marathon Makeover to organize the program. Over the past 10 years, the company has held training groups in six states.

All the groups are based on a few simple principles: Start slow. One foot in front of the other. Don’t run alone. Break the race into small pieces.

That’s a lesson that stuck with Keith Duncan of Ocala, Fla., who trained with the Simpsons in 2009.

“A marathon isn’t 26 miles,” Duncan said. “It’s one mile run 26 times.”

Duncan, 50, played baseball in college and after graduation became a banker and then a pastor.

Years of working behind a desk left him overweight and worried about his health. Still, he was skeptical at first about joining the program because he’d always hated running long distances.

This time it was different.

Training with a group of people made the process easier, he said. The group was there to cheer him on when running got tough and he felt guilty if he didn’t show up for their Saturday training run. Group members walk or run on their own during the week and then do a long run together on the weekend. The Simpsons map out the course and set out coolers of Gatorade and water along the way.

Breaking the race down into shorter pieces also helped, Duncan said. It's a lesson that spilled over into other areas of his life.

"I have learned that life really is about just putting one foot in front of the other," he said. "You may not think you are making progress, but you are moving forward."

Duncan has run one full marathon and another six half-marathons since 2009. When he moved to Florida in 2010 to work for Church@theSprings in Ocala, he started a Saturday morning running group using the same principles.

Most of the folks who sign up for Marathon Makeover, which costs about \$450, are middle-aged and many use the program to deal with some kind of life issue, said Jana Parrish of Ridgeland, Miss.

When she first started in 2009, Parrish was overweight and had tried a number of other exercise or diet programs, quitting most after a few weeks. She hoped that 40 weeks of training might be different.

To get ready, she sent an email to friends asking for help.

"I said I am going to finish a marathon in October – and once you stop laughing – figure out what you can do to help me out," she said.

One friend suggested that Parrish memorize a Bible verse for each mile. That proved too much to keep track of, so she settled on Philippians 4:13, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength," and Isaiah 40:29, "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak."

"Being weak and weary are two things that happen to me on the course," she said. "I was in need of some strength and some power, and I knew where to get it."

Both Duncan and Parrish credited the Simpsons for inspiring

them. Unlike the trainers seen on reality shows who use an in-your-face approach to push people to get fit, the Simpsons use a gentle but firm approach.

“Hardly anyone ever quits,” Simpson said. “The key is to get them moving.”

He said that he learned this kind of approach as a young boy. When he was 9, he fell out of a tree and broke his left arm so badly that it had to be amputated mid-forearm.

While he was in the hospital, a family friend brought a new pair of sneakers and told him he should try to tie them with one hand before he got out.

“They believed in me before I could believe myself,” said Simpson.

He takes the same approach to Marathon Makeover.

“We have faith in them,” he said, “until they can have faith in themselves.”