



After struggling to walk, pastor runs marathon

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Eagle Staff Writer

Monsignor John McCaffrey, 59-year-old pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in Bryan, could barely walk down the aisle in the sanctuary one year ago.

On Nov. 9, he crossed the finish line at the 26.2-mile Athens Marathon in Greece.

"This was a personal goal I wanted to achieve. Some people have a middle-age crisis. I ran a marathon instead," he said.

McCaffrey has a herniated disc that leaves his entire left leg numb. To overcome his disability, the monsignor worked with Cliff Latham, owner of Cutting Edge Personal Training, and Peter Minke, a Bryan practitioner of Aston-Patterning - a therapy that eases stress in tissues and aims to speed recovery through specific movements.

"I could barely walk down the aisle to the front of the church without wobbling from side to side, but soon I started walking faster. Then I found out I could run," McCaffrey said. "It was like a miracle that I could run, so that's all I wanted to do. And why not do it in Athens?"

The modern Athens Marathon commemorates the run of the soldier Pheidippides from a battlefield at Marathon, Greece, to Athens in 490 B.C., bringing news of a Greek victory over the Persians. According to legend, when he arrived in Athens he managed to gasp the words, "Rejoice, we conquer" before dropping dead from exhaustion.

Before McCaffrey could run the route of Pheidippides, he first had to walk to the end of the block. He gradually pushed himself until he was running every day. Latham increased McCaffrey's distances, eventually adding three miles a week.

McCaffrey made a solo flight to Greece to participate in the event. He said he kept the marathon a secret because he was afraid he would not finish.

"They told us there was only one hill, but it was 13 miles up the hill and 13 miles down. I was totally scared and freaking out," he said. "Then I just I pulled together all my physical, mental and spiritual strength, and I did it."

McCaffrey was one of 3,000 men and women from around the world who hit the asphalt that day. All shared a common goal - crossing the finish line.

"The key is to pace yourself. You have to not try to keep up with everyone else and just try to keep up with yourself," he said.

McCaffrey ran the 26.2 miles in five hours, 38 minutes. As he entered Olympic Stadium in Athens, he joined an elite group - less than one-tenth of 1 percent of Americans, by some estimates - who have finished a marathon.

"For my age, having my handicap and this being my first time to run, I'm really proud," McCaffrey said. "I'm looking forward to running another one."

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