



Brian's Run

ONE OF WEST CHESTER'S STRONGEST TRADITIONS

By David Block

In 1978, West Chester Henderson High School sophomore Brian Bratcher became paralyzed while playing a football scrimmage. This drove West Chester residents to put on a one-time 10K race to raise \$500 to defray his medical expenses, yet to everyone's surprise, more than \$20,000 was raised. The huge outpouring of support and goodwill compelled Bratcher to insist that the race take place every year, provided that other people benefit. Thus, Brian's Run became a West Chester tradition, not just for people racing, but for neighbors helping neighbors; recognizing people in need and pitching in to help.

At the twenty-ninth running of Brian's Run (December 3, 2006), Bratcher sat at the finish line as he greeted the participants and thanked them for coming. Brian has been present at the finish line to praise everyone. Like the guest of honor at a major function, the finishers make a point of talking with Bratcher. "Brian's Run is coming home," said Bratcher, forty-three, who lives at the Inglis House in Philadelphia. "Brian's Run is where I belong. I get to see people that I don't get to see anymore."

Due to his spinal cord injury, Bratcher has suffered bouts of depression, and one thing that helps him cope is knowing that the first Sunday in December, he will be at Brian's Run. Brian's father George also tries to attend the event every

year. He vividly remembered the difficulties Brian had in adjusting to becoming a quadriplegic. "Brian was at Jefferson Hospital for eight months and I visited him five days a week and some nights I stayed with him," said George. "I told Brian that if he had had that type of injury ten years earlier he would have died, so I kept telling him that he had to move on with his life. I always told Brian to keep his chin up."

In 2004, George Bratcher had both of his legs amputated-below his knees - due to diabetes. One of the first pieces of advice Brian gave his father was to remain positive. "It was funny," said George. "Now you're telling me to keep my chin up!" George requested the surgery. "I wanted the legs off because I was in constant pain. Now it's gone thanks to the surgery."

George's adjustment was somewhat easy, "I knew what to do for myself because I spent a lot of time helping Brian." George's paralysis strengthened his empathy for his son. "After Brian's accident, he had to depend on people to do things for him, and it was hard for him. Now I'm in a similar boat." George Bratcher manages to stay active. "I'm in the gym three days a week," he said. "I swim, lift and walk. I'll never participate in Brian's Run. I just come here because it's a reunion of family and friends."

Brian shared his father's sentiments in terms of the race being a reunion and homecoming. "Children who I used to see run Brian's Run, now bring their children to compete," said Brian. Among these people Brian Bratcher saw at the last Brian's Run was 5k winner, Marcus O'Sullivan, 15:53, who now had his son with him. O'Sullivan, forty-five is no stranger to Brian's Run. He won the 10k race in 1989 and the 5k race in 2000. Unlike the 10k, no prize money is given to 5k winners.

O'Sullivan is head coach of Villanova University's men's cross country/track teams. People well versed

with track and field know about O'Sullivan because he is one of three people to have run one hundred 1-mile races under four minutes. "I'm not competitive anymore because my body's too tired and I'm too busy coaching," said O'Sullivan. "When I ran (the 2006 Brian's Run 5k), it was a last minute decision." He jumped in because his wife Mary and his son Christopher (a high school freshman track runner at St. Joe's Prep) registered to race, so he joined them to make it a family event. Winning the 5K was somewhat difficult for O'Sullivan this time around. His son Christopher finished fourth, 17:05. "Christopher kept trying to make me nervous before the race," said Marcus O'Sullivan. He said, "I'll beat you. It will be a matter of time." He thought he made me nervous, but he didn't. The father and son duo started out together, but after the first mile, they were in third and fourth place.

"I decided to try to win," said Marcus, "I knew if I didn't, he'd tell me that I held back, that I didn't do my best. So I moved ahead. When he finished, he was huffing and puffing. After he caught his breath he said, he'll beat me, one of these days. Well, he'll have a lot of chances."

In the 10k race, the Villanova coaching staff again left a mark, as the women's head cross country/track coach Gina Procaccio finished fifth with a 37:12 clocking. Procaccio, who won the Brian's Run 10K race in 1999 and 2000, decided at the last minute to compete in '06. "I wasn't in shape, but a friend insisted that I run anyway," said Procaccio. "Coaching can be so demanding that I'm not always motivated to run, so I thought that the race would be a good way to force me to get out, plus I wanted to see if I could win some money." Finishing fifth earned her \$200.

"I'll try to get in shape and see if I can do better next year," said Procaccio. "Even if I don't win money again, Brian's Run has a good cause and I like to be part of it." When she won in 1999 and 2000, she was running 60 miles a week. "Now I'm lucky if I can run 40," said Procaccio.

In the men's division of the Brian's Run 10k race, Valentine Orare, a Kenyan native who trains in West Chester, PA won, with a 29:08 clocking to collect \$700.00. "I was confident that I was going to win," said Orare who explained that after the first mile he tested the competition by surging ahead to see if anyone could stay with him. There were no takers. So for the first five miles, he ran with the pack of elite runners, but then moved ahead and won.

Throughout the race, Orare smiled as area West Chester friends cheered for him. Although he won other races in '06 such as the Baltimore Half Marathon (13.1 miles) and the Philadelphia Half Marathon, winning Brian's Run was more meaningful because it was like winning in his own back yard.

Finishing fourth was his training partner Julius Kibet, 29:18. Kibet and Orare run about a hundred miles a week together. Brian's Run has a number of steep hills, yet neither Orare nor Kibet were impeded. "We're used to the hills because we train in this area all the time," said Orare.

Elite and average runners enjoyed Brian's Run. Finishing 205th in the 10k was 60-year-old Neil Weygandt of Drexel Hill, PA, who clocked 48:01. Weygandt who used to own a running store in Ardmore, PA has run forty Boston Marathons (26.2 miles). "The Boston Marathon is a great race, so I try to run it every year. I also like Brian's Run, but I wished that I had run it when I was younger and faster."

Seventy-four-year old John Schultz of Wilmington, Delaware ran both the 5k and 10k. He finished 709th in the 10k, 1:01:50 and 225th in the 5k, 27:47. When asked why he ran both races, the senior citizen answered, "Because I can." Usually, Schultz will race without a shirt unless it's colder than forty degrees. "After the first mile, I get hot. I'm more comfortable without it." Schultz does not do training runs. "I only race," he said. "In the summer I usually run four or five races a week, but in the winter, it would be one or two."

For more information about Brian's Run: www.briansrun.org.



David Block is passionate about educating the public and raising awareness about the challenges, abilities and accomplishments of blind and other disabled athletes. He promotes this in part by teaching Goalball, the international team sport for blind athletes, to sighted people. He is an inspiration to disabled youth in sharing ways he and others have overcome adversity.

