

Back On My Feet helps Catholic Charities client make marathon debut in Baltimore Running Festival

Michael Martin's attitude towards running mirrors his attitude towards overcoming his addiction.

"Failure is not an option," Martin said.

The 45-year-old recovering heroin addict is among the thousands of runners who will don athletic attire, lace up their sneakers and pound the pavement Oct. 20 for the 18th annual Baltimore Running Festival. Martin will run as a member of Back on My Feet, a national nonprofit with a Baltimore chapter that works to combat homelessness through running, employment and housing support.

Martin has been training to run his first marathon - on a hilly 26.2 mile course that traverses large swaths of Charm City - while receiving wraparound services from Christopher Place Employment Academy, part of Our Daily Bread Employment Center, a service of Catholic Charities of Baltimore.

Martin is captain of the Christopher Place team, one of five sponsored in Baltimore by Back On My Feet.

"It helps me physically get in shape and mentally as well," Martin said. "I make connections, I get to talk to people."

A newer member of Back On My Feet, Martin joined it this summer after arriving at Christopher Place in May.

"I came here (Christopher Place) to get myself back together," Martin said. "Everything I didn't want to do I knew I needed to do. It's been an awesome experience. I don't want to leave the same way I came."

Many of the men at Christopher Place, including Martin, arrive after being discharged from prison or a treatment program, according to Nicole Williams, program manager for Christopher Place Employment Academy.

Following an initial 30 days at the residential employment program, they are eligible to join Back On My Feet. Of the 54 men the center currently serves, 15 participate in the program.

“The Back On My Feet program with our gentleman here at Christopher Place is a great partnership,” Williams said. “It helps them start their day. It helps them get their adrenaline going in the morning. The gentleman have shared that it brings balance to their life. It helps them to also form connections with other people.”

Every day Martin gains a better appreciation for all that Christopher Place offers, which includes education, training and recovery support.

“It’s mind-blowing,” he said. “They treat the whole man. It’s showed me so many things about myself I’ve been struggling with my whole life.”

That struggle includes his father’s absence, years of drug use and incarceration. (Martin is the father of two sons, one of whom died last year from cancer.) While in prison, he ran, for up to two hours at a time in the small outdoor space.

Now Martin’s confidence has been boosted and he has been pushed beyond his comfort zone, thanks to Back On My Feet and his role as a team captain, which includes waking up his teammates and providing accountability to the team.

“They thought I fit the description,” Martin said. “It was awesome. It’s a beautiful bunch of guys.”

Williams describes Martin as humble and driven, and reserved when he first arrived at Christopher Place.

“He would sit back and observe,” Williams said. “By participating with Back On My Feet, it helped him be more assertive, it helps him with sharing in the morning. You can see a difference. He likes to empower the men.”

Martin is one of the 160 men and women being served this year between the five Back on My Feet teams, said Jackie Range, executive director of its Baltimore chapter. The outreach primarily serves men, offers a different approach to individuals experiencing homelessness, addiction and incarceration. It also helps to break down stigmas and address social issues.

“You see people for who they are,” said Range, 35, a parishioner of St. Ignatius in Baltimore and a graduate of Loyola University Maryland. “The issues that we’re dealing with are not going away. There is a great need here in Baltimore and around the country.”

In March, the Baltimore chapter of Back On My Feet will celebrate a decade in the city. With 12 chapters nationwide, thousands of men like Martin have been touched by the thousands of volunteers who have been a part of the organization, Range said.

Intangible side effects of running - at 5:30 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays - include discipline, confidence and greater self-esteem.

“They’re doing a lot more than just running,” Range said.

Williams, the program manager at Christopher Place, notices the sport’s impact on its participants’ focus, attitude and health.

“They say when they go out and run in the morning that they see a difference,” Williams said. “They go out in the crisp, clean air and suck it in while they run. It clears their minds and helps them be more focused.”

Martin said that helps when he taking classes at Christopher Place, such as financial literacy and critical thinking.

On Oct. 20, Back On My Feet will be represented not just with runners but volunteers, such as those staffing at the organization’s water stop at mile 22 on 33rd Street.

“Running is the common ground,” Range said, “but not the sole part of who we are.”

To learn more, visit baltimore.backonmyfeet.org and catholiccharities-md.org/services/christopher-place-employment-academy