

Running is a way of life for Loyola University Maryland professor

By Elizabeth Lowe

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Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner was working on her doctorate in history when she left her native Finland for the U.S. in 1996.

Exercise was not high on her priority list.

"I was not at all athletic," said Lehmijoki-Gardner, a registered nurse and visiting assistant professor of theology at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore. "I was focused on reading. It was my life."

Around 2005, at age 37, Lehmijoki-Gardner, stepped up her level of physical activity and started running.

"I'm a late bloomer," said Lehmijoki-Gardner, now 46. "I started running very slowly."

She ran her first 5K (3.1 miles) race one year later at age 38, first half-marathon (13.1 miles) at age 39 and first marathon (26.2 miles) at age 40.

"It (running a marathon) was a gift to myself," said Lehmijoki-Gardner, who will run her seventh marathon Oct. 12 at the Baltimore Running Festival.

Last year she ran Baltimore in 3 hours, 38 minutes - a personal best.

"I've seen a lot of things, but (the) Baltimore (marathon) is so unique," said Lehmijoki-Gardner, pointing out that when marathon runners make their way through The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore, zookeepers "bring out all sorts of beasts to greet us."

"I'm committed to running a marathon every year throughout my 40s," said Lehmijoki-Gardner, who will re-evaluate that goal in her 50s.

Committed to the sport, Lehmijoki-Gardner nonetheless sets limits. She runs five hours each week, maxing out at 32 miles.

"I don't go beyond that and I don't do less," she said. "Every run has to serve a purpose."

She runs with the Baltimore Pacemakers on weekends and at 5:30 a.m. on Wednesdays. Her weekend runs are longer, typically 13 miles.

"She's a fantastic runner," said Bob Hilson, founder of the Pacemakers, a group of adults who run primarily in Baltimore City. "She's like a wind-up toy - you watch her

go. She has more energy than most of us have out there.”

Hilson described her as a natural.

Lehmijoki-Gardner described the relationships she has with other runners in the group as “easy to manage.”

“We keep up on each other’s lives,” Lehmijoki-Gardner said. “It’s a certain type of intimacy because you’re often talking about body issues, aches and pains. They don’t need to be your best friends.”

Lehmijoki-Gardner works to be a role model for her 13- and 15-year-old sons, particularly when it comes to physical fitness.

“I use every moment to be active,” Lehmijoki-Gardner said. “We can all do it at our own levels. We all have our own ways of our life and learning to discern what is the best for us.”

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