

Making a run for it: How Philly's Back on My Feet went national

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Innovation isn't just for companies in the for-profit world. As part of our new Innovations Desk we're teaming up with Generocity.org to bring you coverage of local nonprofits finding new ways to make a difference.

It's a little after 5:30 a.m. on a Monday. We're at 12th and Race in Philadelphia.

A group of about ten people are gathered in a tight huddle. Some are volunteers, some are residents of the nearby homeless shelter, St. John's Hospice.

Today's [team leader](#), Henry Davis, leads a prayer.

"Who woke us up this morning?" says Davis.

"God," the group replies. "Grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change. The courage to change the things we can..."

Davis sketches out the morning routes — two, three and five-mile options — and then we're off, some [jogging](#), some easing into a brisk walk.

"I'm John. I live at Good Shepard. I just got [enrolled](#) on Back on My Feet on Friday. And I like it so far," said John Oliver. Today's morning run is his first.

Oliver had been homeless off and on for about six years. Then, he kicked drugs and got things together, staying clean for another six years. But recently things fell apart.

"Had my place and all that," recounted Oliver. "[But] I didn't do what I was really supposed to, and I slipped, and got high. That's why I'm back, starting all over."

It's day one for Oliver at Back on My Feet. He says he's doing it for the exercise.

Walking with him is Fred Daniels, a longtime runner and retired salesman who's been volunteering with the program for a month and a half.



"Becoming friends with the guys; that's what's in it for me," said Daniels. "The camaraderie and the thought that you're doing something together — you're pushing each other back."

A healthy clip

That's roughly the point of Back on My Feet: Helping people in homeless shelters by giving them a boost of confidence — enough to maybe help them find stability or even permanent housing.

Currently about 60 homeless people in Philadelphia run with the organization. The local chapter has expanded to five teams.

Nationwide, the group has 400 homeless runners in nine cities, not including hundreds of volunteers.

And it all started in 2007 with a 26-year-old from North Dakota.

"My name is Anne Mahlum and I'm the founder and CEO of Back on My Feet."

Mahlum, now 31, says running was her life's only constant through thick and thin.

She was working in Philadelphia, living off Spring Garden at the time. She often passed a group of guys standing outside a homeless shelter during her morning jog.

"I realized that I was cheating them," said Mahlum. "Here I am moving my life forward, physically, of course, but emotionally, mentally and spiritually, and I'm leaving them on the corner."

Mahlum wanted to do something to help.

Also, they reminded her of her dad, who had struggled with drug, alcohol and, later, [gambling addiction](#) when she was a kid.

"These pieces started to kind of add up in my head and I thought, Running doesn't discriminate," Mahlum says. "Doesn't matter if you're white, black, rich, poor, homeless or not, it can make you discover all the things you like about yourself."

So, Mahlum got nine residents of the shelter to sign a commitment letter. The homeless participants had to show up three days a week and keep a positive attitude.

Back on My Feet slowly began taking shape.

Five months in, the organization was getting national media attention, even though it was just beginning to find its stride.

By 2009, it opened its first chapter outside Philadelphia, in Baltimore.

"We watched it for the next year to see what happened [there]," said Mahlum. "We made a *ton* of mistakes, but we had to do it in order to figure it out. So we took all those lessons and then went to DC a year later, and then just kept expanding every four to five months or so. Unfortunately homelessness is everywhere and fortunately there are passionate people everywhere."

Expansion plans

In five short years, the organization has found ways to grow. Mahlum attributes it to sharp focus and an emphasis on results.

"I think any organization out there that thinks that they can continue to operate based on doing good work is going to have a rude awakening, because everybody's doing good work," said Mahlum. "There has to be a reason for you to stick out."

Corporate support makes up about half of Back on My Feet's budget. But individuals chip in too. At specialty running stores in Back on My Feet cities, when you buy the group's t-shirt, you're buying a member a pair of shoes.

The organization's tenth chapter opens in Austin, Texas this January.

Another four are planned for the West Coast by the end of 2013.

"I think organizations that have good models that are innovative do expand nationally," said Nan Roman, CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

Roman says Back on My Feet has done a great job of tackling *part* of the problem. It helps people feel better about themselves, Roman says, even if it doesn't directly take on the root of homelessness.

"It's not housing," said Roman. "It's not the whole solution by itself, but it's a part of the solution. And I think it's a part of the solution that the kind of harder programs that focus on housing and employment and so forth often miss."

One run at a time

Back at 12th and Race, the runners and walkers huddle up again before taking on a hot Monday.

Mike Parson has run over 400 miles with Back on My Feet.

He had been on the streets for some 15 years, struggling with an addiction to crack cocaine.

"It's unbelievable that I have a good day," said Parson. "The days that I *had* been running were really bad, really bad."

After almost a year at St. John's, Parson is now in a housing program with enough money saved up to get his own place soon.

He says Back on My Feet is one of a handful of programs that helped get his life back together.

As for the organization's rapid growth, Parson hopes it expands as far as possible.

"It would change a lot of people's lives to the better," Parson said. "It sure enough changed mine. My life has changed a lot."

Anne Mahlum couldn't think of a better endorsement.

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