

# The Running Life: Expo-Say

## Telling Tales at Grandma's House

By Candace Karu

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Two years ago, when this column first appeared, a friend gave me some invaluable advice. She told me to write what was important to me. She reminded me that this was not simply another writing assignment, but a vehicle to articulate my unique perspective on what running means to me. It was difficult at first, losing the familiar journalist's distance, which requires that the writer absent herself from the story. But once I got over the initial discomfort of putting myself out there for the world to see, the column became not only more personal, but more authentic.

It might have been called My Running Life or A Running Life, but neither of those titles would fit. It's true that this column is an account of my experiences as a runner, but it is also a record of how running can impact the life of any runner. Some of the columns have been introspective, examining the ways in which running has changed me, almost exclusively for the better. Others have dealt with the lives and issues of other runners, or universal experiences all runners can relate to. The column has become a way for me to expand the circle that is my running family, a way to hear and tell the stories that resonate with me. They are the stories that explain, both to the running community and the world at large, why and how running can help define a life.

One of the best parts of my job is going to marathon expos and working at the Running Times booth. OK, the 12-hour booth stints are actually not my favorite job-related activity. But meeting the people who take the time to stop by, hearing what they have to say about the magazine and my column, that really is the best part. Knowing that I have connected with readers, listening to what they like, and sometimes what they hate, about Running Times, finding out what motivates, excites, inspires runners from around the country; those are the things that make this job so great.

Every couple of years I'm invited to speak at the Grandma's Marathon expo in Duluth, Minnesota. I've presented a number of different talks over the years, each of which was mildly, but never wildly, well-received. On the day before a big race, most people don't really want to hear some stranger yammer on about "Rest and Recovery After the Marathon," or "Women's Running: Stronger Than Ever." If I had to guess, I'd say a majority of the runners who came to my talks were probably in there just trying to get off their feet before taking another spin around the expo. For many, listening to a little-known featured speaker was the price of admission.

This year was different. Much to my delight, I discovered that there are a fair number of people who actually read this column; some of them really like it. A few can even quote me to me. Let me tell you, this is no small thing to a writer. Having a reader repeat verbatim something you wrote a year ago is a heady experience. There were a bunch of these folks at my talk. There were still people there who didn't know me from John Bingham, people whose legs were tired and needed a place to perch, but it looked like The Running Lifers were in the majority.

Though I had spent the weeks prior to Grandma's preparing a talk, something about "Know Your Running Type," ultimately I decided to try something new. Instead of talking to the people in the room, I wanted to talk with them. I thought it would be a lot more interesting if along with me telling my stories, everyone else would have a chance to tell theirs.

When it was time to begin, I stepped away from the podium, sat down on the lip of the stage and explained my strategy. It was a slow start but eventually a voice from the audience called out: "Get Jeff to tell his story." With a little prodding, Jeff Rizner opened up. In 2001 at the age of 37, Jeff suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed on his right side. Though he wasn't a runner before his stroke, he became one in recovery. He went from learning how to walk to running a marathon in less than three years. As he spoke, often haltingly and shedding a few tears, I saw the tissues come out. It was impossible for any of us to be unmoved by Jeff's account.

After Jeff, Jeannie Young spoke about her long and impressive running career, which has included running the Olympic Trials marathon and appearing on the cover of Running Times in 1994. Jeannie told the group about her two autistic sons and how running has not only given her a respite from the demands of her daily life, it has also given her a platform from which she has raised awareness and funds for families affected by autism.

The stories continued until people started filtering into the room for the next speaker. As we left, many of us gathered in the hallway, exchanging an email address, a phone number, or a quick embrace, knowing that what we had just experienced was a gathering to be remembered and cherished.

Here's what I know about runners. There is an unspoken but deeply felt bond that connects us to one another. We can go from stranger to trusted confidant in the space of a run or an hour gathered in a crowded auditorium. We can share our most intimate thoughts and know that they are protected by the unspoken code of the road. I know that running not only strengthens our bodies, it often fortifies our hearts and minds, conferring an inner resilience that mirrors our physical capabilities. And I have discovered that very often, courage, empathy, and character can be natural by-products of a running life.

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