

Dream Job

Mary Wittenberg's Journey

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Sitting amid the organized clutter that defines the day-to-day workings of the New York Road Runners Club, Mary Wittenberg, 39 looks like a grown-up version of the proverbial girl next door. One quickly learns, however, that her fresh-faced good looks belie an iron will, fierce determination and an uncompromising work ethic; all qualities that have brought her to the position she now occupies—second in command of the world's largest running club. A seasoned attorney with a hard-earned background in the art of the deal, she is also an enthusiastic and talented athlete with experience in numerous team sports, and a passionate and determined runner. Like many women her age, she benefited from the sacrifices and trials of her elders, while still having to blaze trails of her own. Along with few other women in the business of running, she is at the vanguard, leading the way for all women to enjoy full participation in the sport they love.

Crew Chief

Mary Robertson Wittenberg was the first child born into a large, Irish Catholic family in Buffalo, NY. All seven Robertson children participated in the sports their father coached. Mary played baseball, softball and basketball with her brothers and sisters until she got to high school. For three years in high school, however, cheerleading was her "sport" of choice. It was in her senior year that Wittenberg decided she wanted to be more of an athletic participant than a bystander. The West Side Rowing Club offered her a perfect opportunity. She instantly took to crew, which was to hold her attention and dedication for the next five years, as she found that her slight build and long limbs gave her an edge on the water.

At Canisius College in Buffalo Wittenberg continued rowing with the West Side Rowing Club, and also served as coxswain for the men's college crew team. This pivotal job as leader, coach and motivator for her teammates was a unique position for a woman at the time. Part of the team's training regimen were daily runs, which Wittenberg ran stride for stride with her teammates. This ability to run a solid workout with "the guys" gave her additional, and much needed, credibility. It also started her on her road racing career and life-long love affair with running.

A Surprise Victory, A Budding Dream

The beginning of her senior year brought with it a decision to take a year off from crew and organized sports in general. "I wanted to see what real college life was like. I wanted to go to happy hour and have a beer with friends and just relax," she says, with a grin. One of those bar sessions ended with a challenge to run a road race the next day. No one was more surprised than Wittenberg when she won. The victory peaked the interest of Canisius's cross country coach. He approached her after the race and asked that she give his team "two weeks...if you don't love it, you can quit." She took him up on the offer, and trained with the men's cross country team for the rest of her senior year. Her season was topped by winning the Buffalo leg of the Diet Pepsi 10K Road Race Series, which qualified her to race against the best in the country in New York City—a thrill she remembers to this day.

In August of 1984 Wittenberg headed to South Bend, IN to begin law school at Notre Dame. It was there that Coach Joe Piani invited Mary to run with his men's cross country team, part of a loosely organized group of "outsiders." Though most of her energy was focused on the study of law, the team gave Wittenberg a foundation of friendship, camaraderie and a refined ability to respect the accomplishments of a widely diverse group of people, mostly men. Wittenberg feels that athletics allowed her to create bonds with men that have served her well throughout her career.

It was while with this group that Wittenberg decided, almost on a whim, to run the 1985 Chicago Marathon. With strict instructions from Coach Piani to run conservatively, Mary toed the line with Joan Benoit, Ingrid Kristiansen and Rosa Mota. "It was incredibly exciting for someone like me," she remembers. "And it was a great experience. I ran 2:46 for 16th place and felt absolutely fine." Her time was under the 2:50 cut-off that she would need to run in the following year to make the 1988 Women's Olympic Marathon Trials. The seeds of an Olympic dream were planted.

Burning Both Ends

When it came time to apply to law firms, Wittenberg decided she wanted to work for a big firm in a smaller city, with the goal of rising to the top of a large corporate practice. She found a perfect match at the Richmond, VA office of Hunton and Williams. The head of the corporate team who hired her was a runner and encouraged her to leave work at 3:30 every afternoon to train with the University of Richmond cross country team. After her workout,



Wittenberg returned to the office and worked or studied for the bar until one or two every morning. "I was walking a very fine line with work and running and it could have gone either way. I could have just as easily injured myself and failed the bar." As it turned out, her running improved and she passed the bar on her first try. In 1987 she won the Marine Corps Marathon in 2:44—earning her spot in the Olympic Trials.

Disappointment and Distractions

Marine Corps, however, would prove to be Wittenberg's peak, as the grueling schedule of work and training began to take its toll. In January she sustained a knee injury requiring surgery only 11 weeks before the Olympic Trials. A back injury a week before the race—as demoralizing as it was debilitating—compounded her woes. Though she started the race, she was the first to drop out after two miles. Her tears, captured by news crews, were broadcast throughout the country as an image of frustration and disappointment.

The next several years found Wittenberg working fiercely on the fast track at her law firm, climbing the corporate ladder with speed and assurance. She credits many of the skills she honed as an athlete and team player for helping in her rise to the top of her field. "I loved doing deals, and I was passionate about being part of a team," Wittenberg recalls. "The team approach in business was familiar and comfortable for me because I had always played sports with men."

In 1994 Wittenberg was sent to New York City by her firm, a move that necessitated even greater commitment. All-nighters were a common occurrence and running took a back-seat, but Wittenberg did manage to connect with several running teams in the city, and meet her future husband, Derek.

Her dedication at work did not go unrecognized. In 1997 she made partner—"the first woman partner in my team."

Despite this success, Wittenberg began to question her future. "I got to a point where I knew I was not put on this earth to do transactions and take advantage of tax laws." But how could she leave the practice that had given her so many opportunities? "Ultimately I had no choice but to consider something else. I loved my husband. I wanted a child. I wanted a change."

Perfect Fit

Like many things that are meant to be, Wittenberg came to the New York Road Runners Club on a fluke. In the summer of 1998 someone heard that Allan Steinfeld, President of NYRRC, was looking for a second-in-command. That someone also knew Wittenberg was exploring her options. Introductions were made and an interview was arranged.

"I was absolutely intimidated," Wittenberg recalls. "I was going from an office with enormous resources—oriental rugs and hardwood floors—to the organized chaos of this not-for-profit operation that was the stuff of history: to me Allan Steinfeld was a legend. But it was also clear that this was a perfect time for transition."

The organization was still recovering and reorganizing after the death of Fred Lebow. "Fred was Mr. Outside," says Wittenberg. "He was the visionary and Allan was the execution guy, the brilliant tactician. When Fred died, Allan tried to do both jobs during a time when the club was growing at an amazing rate. All of a sudden, it had become a multi-million dollar company. I don't know how Allan did it. There was this tremendous need at the club, which I found extremely attractive."

The club felt a similar attraction, offering Wittenberg the job of Executive Vice President of Administration—the highest position a woman has held in the club's history. Wittenberg accepted, and soon her title became simply Executive VP.

Wittenberg's responsibilities range from event production, to oversight of the NYRRC website, NY Runner magazine, merchandise, membership and race scoring. It was a match made in heaven. "I wanted to start putting systems into place, procedures and goals," Wittenberg says about her first months on the job. "It was a daunting and exhilarating time. I realized pretty quickly that this was my dream job, working to promote a sport I love. I've never looked back for a second."

The NYRRC has no regrets either. "Mary gets people to think differently, to think bigger," says Allan Steinfeld, President and CEO. "Her best quality is her reasonableness. She knows how to get people together, to get them to cooperate. This is a big organization, with many different departments. People were used to operating in their own sphere. Mary found ways to get them all working toward the same goals."

Wittenberg is reflective when asked why she took a job that changed her professional life so dramatically. "I am enthusiastic about working at the NYRRC because I appreciate the opportunity to make a difference. Running changes people's lives at all levels. It is important for NYRRC to continue to positively affect the lives of as many people as possible—people of all ages, genders and races—by introducing them to running and giving them outlets for participation and education." The light in Wittenberg's eyes makes it clear that the prospects of the NYRRC fill her with palpable excitement and purpose.

A Parental Perspective

In the winter of 2000, a year and half after starting with the NYRRC, Wittenberg announced her pregnancy, and in June gave birth to a son. Alex Wittenberg's birth began a process that would irrevocably change her life and her career. "Because my pregnancy had some unexpected complications—namely nine weeks at home and some hospital bedrest to calm pre-term labor—I had to back off. For almost four weeks I worked very little and was more out of touch with the office than I've been since I started working in 1987."

Wittenberg, true to her nature, saw this as a unique opportunity. "I was able to step back from the daily operation of the Club and look at the big picture with a fresh perspective. Once I get back in the fall, I plan to maintain the same level of involvement; working at a higher level. It's what the Club needs from Allan and me in order to provide effective leadership." Wittenberg perceives this change in

her own management style as a real benefit to the organization. "It gives the department heads and their staffs the opportunity to handle the logistics and details on their own, which is the way it should be."

Her training, too, has necessarily changed since her son's arrival. The bedrest definitely left Wittenberg in a "different muscular state." But she is sanguine about her ability to adapt to new physical standards. "We did not have this child not to spend time with him, so Alex will get first priority, with work second. Running and working out will fit in somewhere in between. I'm sure I will get it in because it is important to me and to my family. It just may be a little bit harder than in the past. Many athletes far more accomplished than I have managed to combine running, family life and work, so I've got to assume that where there's a will, there's a way."

There are lessons to be learned in the crowded halls of a converted Eastside townhouse near Central Park that serves as the NYRRC's headquarters. What started as a rag-tag group organized by a charismatic leader, now gone, has turned into a multi-million dollar corporation with worldwide influence. Perhaps one of the most important lessons here is the value of new resources and new ways of doing things. Allan Steinfield and the NYRRC chose Mary Wittenberg to blaze new trails. Watch carefully, there will be other women following close behind.

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