

Meeting at Joanie

This is my group.

By Candace Karu

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This is a love story, a paean to ten extraordinary women. This is a story of lives well lived, roads well run and miles well shared. Individually, these women are exceptional and unique; together, they are like hundreds of other groups in cities and towns across the country. This is my group. These are the women who define my running life and a good part of the rest of my life as well.

At 5:30 a.m., on any given morning in the small Maine town of Cape Elizabeth, you will find a surprising number of women leaving their cars in the library parking lot and heading for "Joanie." We gather around a life sized bronze statue of the town's most well known native, Joan Benoit Samuelson, memorialized for forging her Olympic dreams on the roads, hills and beaches of this picture-postcard New England village. The runners are there no matter what the time of year, no matter what the weather. Inky black mornings do not stop us, nor does snow or ice. These morning runs are a cherished ritual that give rhythm and structure to ten diverse and complicated lives. The group will occasionally include a man or two; men given honorary "girl" status by virtue of their willingness to join in the intimate conversations that inevitably take place. But the heart and the soul of this group are the women who gather year in and year out to share their lives as they run.



Where Everybody Knows Your Name

Kim Moody Roberts is a Ph.D., a college professor, a mother of 11 year old twins and an accomplished ultra-runner. A Maine native, Kim has lived as far away as Seattle, but eventually settled not far from where she grew up.

"It's hard to put into words what these women mean to me," Kim says. "When I lived out west I mostly ran alone. Since I came back to Maine, I value the closeness and sharing of this group. We all have different backgrounds and very different lives, but when we run together, our similarities surface. Though we don't often race together, we share our accomplishments, both on and off the road. What is important to me is that we take care of each other and, yes, that we really love each other."

Kim's neighbor, Carrie Croft shares a deep affection for the group. Carrie, the mother of a toddler and a 4th grader, is a former preschool teacher. She is struck by the luxury of consistently spending time with thoughtful, giving running companions.

"Our runs offer a perfect environment for opening up," states Croft. "It is an amazing atmosphere in which to experience nature and each other. That environment is somehow conducive to conversations that probably wouldn't take place over a cup of tea in our kitchens. I'm not sure if it has something to do with being outdoors—feeling connected both to each other and to something greater." Croft continues, "Sometimes I'm struck by the fact that before 7 o'clock in the morning I've already had an incredible experience in my day. It sets the tone for everything that follows. I'm physically and mentally better prepared for what's to come."

Perhaps it is the combination of physical exertion and mental engagement that allows groups like this one to bond in a unique fashion. Running creates a certain rhythm and pace that influences more than just how we run. It also influences how we relate to one another. A grueling track workout will spawn a different conversation than a long, slow weekend run.

Martha Kelley, former attorney, law professor and mother of three young boys can attest to the importance and unique benefits of running with the group. For the last several weeks she has been unable to join us in the mornings due to a knee injury.

"Nothing else works," laments Kelley, who has been swimming to compensate for her inability to run. "I miss the physical and the mental aspects of running. Most of all I miss that long Sunday group run. We laugh, we help each other with kids' problems, we're just there for each other. This injury has made me appreciate everything that running and this group gives me. I'll never again take it for granted."

Both Jennifer DeSena and Laurie Harvey, two of our faster runners, are thrilled to be part of a group that has inadvertently set a very positive example for Harvey's two daughters and DeSena's three. "This is the kind of support I hope my daughters will have in their lives as they get older," says DeSena. "And I hope they also understand the value of the effort we put into our running." Evidently DeSena's point has been well-made. Her 14 year old daughter, Whitney, recently finished second in a local 5K. Harvey's girls, though too young to run, still absorb group activity as they play on the infield of the high school track and watch their mom go through her paces.

In addition to keeping each other's secrets and sharing what is in our hearts, there is also a real emphasis on fun. Running together keeps us in touch with our younger selves. There is a real aspect of playfulness to our time together that solidifies and defines our friendships. We're not always solving the problems of the world. "When I picture this group in my head, I picture us laughing...at jokes, at each other, at life," says Croft.

Founder's Fortieth Fitness Frenzy

Although no one can remember an exact time or date, we all credit personal fitness trainer Sarah MacColl with the genesis of the group. In what we lovingly call her "Fortieth Fitness Frenzy," MacColl decided to commemorate that momentous birthday by completing both a popular local two mile swim and running her first marathon. She impressed a couple of friends into running servitude to keep her company on her long runs, requiring they meet her "at Joanie" at 5:30 a.m. She chose the location because it's a convenient spot with many options for challenging mileage and scenery. She chose the time because her services are in demand from early morning until late at night, and because her husband and two children would still be asleep at that hour. No one was surprised when Sarah qualified for Boston in her first marathon attempt. Because she did, however, she felt compelled to keep up her marathon training during the winter, requiring that she round up more runners to guarantee that she would always have fresh training partners.

"Every time I show up, I'm sure I'm welcome," says MacColl, the group's funniest and most vocal member; the one we count on not only for sound training advice, but for quality dirty jokes as well. MacColl's own summation speaks for all of us. "I feel as if I could pour my heart out about a problem to any woman in the group and come away with the promise of great support, practical suggestions, a sense of reality and a smile. I feel I could arrive with a cockamamie idea and get accurate feedback. I know I could walk away with hundreds of dollars if I explained why I needed it and that I could never pay it back. I can also get any recipes I need and an honest assessment of a new haircut. And that's just the beginning."

Experts All Around

MacColl deserves considerable credit for the success (and, yes, we use a very broad definition of the word success in this group) we have at road races. In addition to dispensing a broad range of knowledge and expertise in the field of fitness, MacColl has addressed various members' specific dilemmas, such as post-partum recovery or pre-menopausal coping methods. If she doesn't have a valid and specific response to our questions, she will tirelessly research the matter until she finds the answer that gets to the heart of the specific topic.

MacColl's effectiveness has been enhanced by a more recent addition to the group. Mary Ann Doss is a mother and the coach of the State Champion Cape Elizabeth High School Girls' track team. Doss is the voice of encouragement, experience and constant positive reinforcement, which she uses to great advantage. We all wonder where she gets the energy at 5:30 a.m. to lead 800 repeats and whoop and holler all the while.

In addition to MacColl's training expertise, we rely heavily on group member Jane Hanley's extensive background in nutrition. Professionally, Hanley has her own advertising and marketing business. But her interest in nutrition benefits not only her husband and three children; her running partners are also on the receiving end of her expertise. When asked what the group means to her, Hanley's reply is the most direct. "I run with these women because they put a smile in my heart every time we are together."

Our newest member came to us from Vancouver, BC. Keri Hanlon and her husband, Glen, the new head coach of the Portland Pirates hockey team, moved here in the dead of Maine's winter. Hanlon had been a middle school teacher in Vancouver, but because of her immigration status, couldn't work in the United States. She knew "not a soul" in her new town, but on the advice of a stranger, she drove "to Joanie" at an ungodly hour on a frigid morning, and changed her life.

"I needed to make a connection with someone and I hit the jackpot when I met this group," say Hanlon. "These women have been my lifeline and I'm grateful everyday for meeting such a diverse group of individuals who welcomed me with open arms. My only concern happened the first day. The pace on that first run was so fast that I barely made it back to my truck. I asked one of the women if they usually ran at that pace and she told me that they usually ran faster. My first day was almost my last!" That memory is rather ironic, as Hanlon is now often lovingly referred to as "Hammerhead Hanlon" for her ability to lead the pack under almost any conditions.

Strength, Stability and Success

Hanlon's seamless incorporation into the group illustrates why I believe we are such a successful little running unit. The very act of gathering together to run gives us structure and balance. It begins our day. Running allows us to stay fit and healthy. Through our running we are positive examples for our children and our families. But more importantly, this group—this unique assemblage of women who run—is stronger together than we are apart. As a unit we solidify each other's individual positions in our families, in our communities and especially within ourselves.

Like any good love story, this one has a happy ending. I joined this group over three years ago. Just as I was settling into a rhythm, my life started to change dramatically, both personally and professionally. Very little felt solid or secure. But the one thing that didn't change, that remained true day in and day out, was this extraordinary group of women. They kept my spirits up and my outlook optimistic.

And in this difficult time, they even helped me become a better runner. As I write, I am recovering from running Grandma's Marathon in Duluth, Minnesota. It was my seventeenth marathon, a distance for which my times have gotten consistently slower over the last five years. In spite of personal turmoil, and the very real demands of a new job, to my amazement I ran a P.R. I give all the credit to the group, which was with me every step of the way.