



*Photo by Mark Czajkowski
Mike and Courtney Newman,
founders of Steps Together, which
organizes fund-raising races.*

Mike & Courtney Newman

Couple takes an idea and runs with it

By Gene Robbins

See Mike and Courtney Newman run.

Then see them encourage others to join them.

The Hillsborough couple, has taken the ubiquitous foot race and turned it into a community-building, spirit-inspiring celebration of altruism.

For the Newmans, running is a labor of love, in the truest sense of the word. They've built an organization called Steps Together that raises money by offering runners training, a team feeling and a motivating cause — all in one package.

Hillsborough-bred Courtney Newman, 34, an effervescent multi-tasker, handles the couple's two young children during the day while juggling emails and phone calls. Mike Newman, 41, a sinewy development engineer employed by BOC Gases, goes to work on the computer after helping to put the kids to bed.

They both help runners push themselves. Their hobby turns into late nights and a hectic few weeks before a race.

But then, "it's a real sense of accomplishment on race day when it all comes together," Mrs. Newman says.

Mrs. Newman's mom, Diane Schilke, was Mr. Newman's real estate agent. Her mother had an inkling Mr. Newman might be right for her daughter. She introduced them the night before Mrs. Newman's first marathon at Philadelphia in 2004.

Mr. Newman ran and placed 20th in 2:37 and looked for Mrs. Newman at the finish. Her time of 3:39.58 slipped under the qualifying mark for the Boston Marathon by just two seconds.

Her entire family was there to cheer her on. Mr. Newman, who was at the race by himself, was invited to the post-race family dinner.

That night they hung out together and talked about the special allure of the Boston race.

"She didn't know what the Boston Marathon was," Mr. Newman says.

Over the next four months, the two would meet on Sunday mornings to train for Boston. Four or five times, Mr. Newman flew home from Europe to keep the training "date," without his partner knowing it.

But Mrs. Newman was still "clueless," she says, setting up Mr. Newman for dates with her girlfriends for Valentine's Day.

On the day of the Boston Marathon, Mr. Newman followed Mrs. Newman's progress on the Internet (an electronic chip on her shoe allowed people to monitor a racer's progress step by step). When she crossed the finish line, Mr. Newman almost simultaneously was on the phone to Ms. Schilke.

They went out to celebrate days later. After a beer — maybe more, Courtney admitted — she blurted "I love you" to Mike. They married in 2004.

"If you run with somebody for four months, you get to know them authentically," she says "You can't get to know somebody any better than to go on a run with them."

Ms. Schilke says her daughter and son-in-law "are two of the most passionate people I know. There's nothing like them. They love being together. They love to run and they are always trying to figure out how to make a difference in the world through their passion for running."

A high school runner, Mrs. Newman grew up in an atmosphere of community involvement. Ms. Schilke, a real estate professional, was chair of the Board of Directors for the Cancer Support Community of Central Jersey, which coordinates activities of five cancer hospitals.

Ms. Schilke's mom, Madeline, now 90 and living in Millstone, and her deceased father, Oscar, were involved with the local rescue squad and food bank, among other efforts.

"I like to think this trickled down to my children," says Ms. Schilke.

The Newmans connected running and charity through the Cancer Support Community. The Newmans volunteered to organize "destination marathons," asking \$3,000 for the charity in exchange for arranging the trip and leading the training. Over five years, they led 30 or so runners annually to marathons in Big Sur, Nashville, Phoenix, Louisville and Virginia Beach, raising an estimated \$500,000 in total before "retiring" in 2010, says Ms. Schilke.

"Everybody loved being on the team because of Courtney and Mike," she says.

A personal brush with potential tragedy may have sensitized the young married couple even more. Five days after daughter Emma was born in April 2010, son Jacob (age 2) had a seizure. Then their newborn turned blue and was rushed to Robert Wood Johnson Hospital, where she stayed for two weeks.

The day Emma was released, the doctors showed the Newmans how to do full CPR — just in case. And that night, hours after settling in at home, Emma stopped breathing again.

"We were blessed," says Mr. Newman. "They taught us CPR as we left the hospital and we needed it that night. Somebody was taking care of us."

Doctors diagnosed Emma with an undeveloped esophagus muscle that would cause her to stop breathing if she were laid flat. Emma grew out of that by the age of 6 months but both children now deal with febrile seizures. The Newmans have been

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Race benefits Hillsborough guidance counselor and coach Ian Progin.



Rubber bracelets represent many of the causes the Newmans' organizations help.

Photo by Mark Czajkowski
Mike and Courtney
Newman train together.



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assured the children will grow out of it by age 6; the parents see evidence of that each passing month.

In those days at the hospital, when they didn't know if they would walk out with their baby, they came to empathize with that desperate, helpless feeling of parents fearing for their seriously ill children.

Later in 2010, the Newmans were aghast to learn that Ian Progin, a Hillsborough High School classmate of Mrs. Newman and a guidance counselor and a basketball coach at their alma mater, had been diagnosed with a stage 4 glioblastoma.

The Newmans wanted to help, and they realized they could raise money through running.

Instead of trying to organize a race on their own, the Newmans decided to piggyback on the Steeplechase Run and Walk, organized by the Somerset Medical Center and staged at the Amsterdam Elementary School in Hillsborough.

The couple thought if they could get 200 people to register for the race — and then encourage them to raise more — they could help the family financially. More than 700 people joined the “Progin’s Players” effort.

In addition to a huge community appeal for Mr. Progin, a lifelong Hillsborough resident, the Newmans applied their own

wrinkles.

Being runners and trainers, they could easily supply running tips and encouragement to anyone who joined their “team.” They led voluntary weekly training runs at Duke Island Park to build camaraderie.

They also supplied confidence-building tips to help people overcome any reticence about raising money. They sent out supportive advice and subtle nudging on fund raising. They encouraged people to write a personal letter to friends explaining why the cause meant so much to them, or to send gentle reminders.

They would toss out fundraising ideas — how about a murder mystery party? Or solicit the three local businesses you patronize the most?

The recipe worked beyond their wildest dreams and helped the wider community effort for the Progin.

“They are good people who want to help others,” says Mr. Progin. “They enjoy the fundraising aspect and work hard at it, not just for me but for a lot of people.”

He says the effort helped him emotionally and physically as much as financially.

“My tumor will reoccur and when it does I know I’ll have the financial resources, raised in big part by them and my cousin, Heather Grande, to deal with it,” Mr. Progin says.

Mr. Progin says he was touched when he attended some of the group sessions and seeing dozens of people training for him. The community effort motivated Mr. Progin — by his own admission not much of a distance runner — to get into shape and join the sea of cardinal-and-gold T-shirted runners on race day. He jogged most of the race, and walked the rest.

“For me and my family to see all that support, care and concern, you can’t put a price on that,” he says.

This year, Mr. Progin ran for 8-year-old cancer victim Jacob Grecco of Phillipsburg and was even more motivated, he says, covering the three miles at just under a 10-minute-per mile clip.

“Everybody did it for me last year and I wanted to return the favor for somebody else,” he says.

The Progin’s Players’ success made others notice. The Newmans fielded calls from people asking for tips to replicate the effort.

Instead of trying to repeat their story many times, the Newmans decided to try to organize all over again. The eight groups that asked about mimicking the effort became beneficiaries of September’s reprise at the Steeplechase Run.

In addition to the race registration, runners who wanted to help Steps Together were asked for a \$25 donation. Runners could focus on raising money for any or all of the eight causes on the benefit “menu.”

More than 300 Steps Together runners raised a total of about

\$31,000. Most went to the causes people had checked; about \$7,000 was equally distributed.

Now the Newmans grapple with thoughts about enlarging the effort, perhaps incorporating as a non-profit or tackling more than one race date a year.

"We've proven successfully that people want to get in shape while helping the community," says Mr. Newman.

They also have found they can "build on people's passion," his wife adds.

Steps Together has created a family of awareness that grows upon itself, Mrs. Newman says.

Derrith Spitzer, for example, responded in 2011 to a flier at her home along the race route that asked for a \$10 donation in exchange for a supportive balloon on the mailbox on race day.

Courtney's sister Rebecca learned the Spitzers' son, Ben, had leukemia. On race day, volunteers showed up early and plunked down signs saying "Great job, Ben" and "You're the best brother, Jack," on the Spitzers' front lawn.

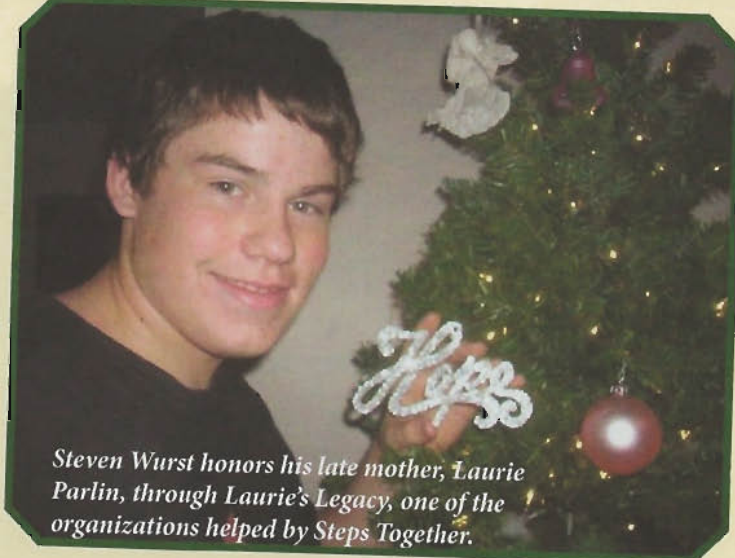
"It really meant a lot to us," says Ms. Spitzer. "I knew I was in the midst of very special people and it catapulted me to get involved."

She helped Steps Together this year with communication and website work and added her own neighborhood network to Steps Together. After exchanging what she said was hundreds of emails, and despite living less than a mile away, she never met the Newmans until a few days before this year's race, she says.

"We should always try to give back and do something for others," says Ms. Spitzer. "It's extremely important to teach that to our children."

The Spitzers were asked if they needed financial help with dealing with their son's disease. They didn't, but Ms. Spitzer recommended two groups.


The Newmans have since learned of three kids with leukemia in



Steven Wurst honors his late mother, Laurie Parlin, through Laurie's Legacy, one of the organizations helped by Steps Together.

Hillsborough. While none needed financial support, it prompted the Newmans to register in a bone marrow donation program in late August.

Lo and behold, Mike came up as a potential donor for a 35-year-old woman. He is waiting to hear if he is an exact match.

"That never would have happened if we didn't do the team and get a vibe for our community," says Mrs. Newman. 

Organizations they help

Two of the eight groups supported by Steps Together in 2012 are based in Hillsborough.

One is Chain of Hope, a non-profit providing financial support to local families. Another is Laurie's Legacy, which was organized in 2009 by Hillsborough High School junior Stephen Wurst in honor of his late mom, Laurie Parlin, who succumbed to breast cancer.

The other groups are:

- **Jake's Snazzy Pistols:** Honoring 8-year-old Jacob Grecco from Phillipsburg, who battled a rare and aggressive brain tumor until Aug. 1.
- **Claudia's Courage:** For Claudia Arostegui, a single mother from Weehawken battling her second occurrence of breast cancer after fighting a year for proper diagnosis.
- **Healing for Hayley:** For Hayley Filippini, a ninth-grader from Readington Township, diagnosed with a rare, inoperable and malignant brain tumor.
- **Team Xtreme:** For 1 year-old Xavier Thomas Ross of Glen Ridge, who is awaiting his third open-heart surgery.
- **Team Victory:** Supporting the Guirguis family of Edison, who recently lost their husband and father to brain cancer after a six-year battle.
- **Canine Battle Buddies:** The canine adoption service to help soldiers adjust back to civilian life.

For more: www.steps-together.com.

Progin's Players train for a fundraising race.

