

65 Runners, 7 Children Pushing Beyond Limits at The Half Marathon



by Ashley
Bendiksen

As thousands prepare to tackle the annual New Bedford Half Marathon, many others eagerly anticipate the sights and sounds of what has become one of the city's most exciting events. The 13.1-mile race attracts runners from all over, and while runners race for a number of reasons, many choose to run in honor of those who cannot. Entering its third year, "Pushing Beyond Limits" does just that by serving children who are unable to run and by giving them a lifetime opportunity to cross the finish line!

A partnership between the Schwartz Center for Children and BayCoast Bank, "Pushing Beyond Limits." pairs race runners with children from Schwartz to collectively finish the entire half marathon. Teams of runners are matched with one child and each team commits to a specific "leg" of the race (typically a 2-4 mile stretch). Runners take turns pushing the children and when they complete their leg, the next team takes off.

This year, seven children will participate alongside a total of 65 runners. Kimberly Wilmot, Director of Clinical Services at Schwartz, says of the event, "It allows kids with physical disabilities to have the opportunity to actively participate in a sports event; it allows them to become athletes in their

own way.” The children participating range in age from 4 years old to 12 years old. All live with some form of physical disability and/or developmental disorder from cerebral palsy and epilepsy to legal blindness.

“Something as simple as running is a stretch for many of these kids, and for some, will never be a reality.” says Nicole Almeida, BayCoast Vice President and Regional Manager. “These children get to experience something they would never have been able to – completing a half marathon.” This year, BayCoast Bank has taken an additional step by chipping in for bib numbers so that each child’s name will appear in the official standings! When asked why BayCoast is so supportive, Almeida states, “The day of the event is truly inspirational! All of these runners, coming together selflessly, to push themselves and these children beyond their limits! It’s amazing!”

For these children, being in the race means so much more. It is life-changing. According to Wilmot, “It is a combination of things – the excitement and the joy the kids experience getting ready for the race, during the race, and after the race as their families rush to greet



them. It’s the excitement and pride of the parents as they see their kids off and watch them cross the finish line, or in some cases, cross the finish line with them. They gather for pictures and are given medals.”

Then, there are the bonds that form to create lasting memories. Speaking on behalf of BayCoast, Almeida states that many runners have run with the same child for the past three years and most repeat runners request to be on the same team. Adding to that, Wilmot notes how engaged the runners are with the children. “It is amazing to see how quickly the race

becomes all about the kids. Runners learn about who the kids are and what they like. They wear special clothes in the kids' favorite colors, bring a favorite character, ask questions about favorite things so they can keep talking to the kids throughout the race. Runners have sung and danced during the race just to see the kids smile or hear them laugh."

From start to finish, "Pushing Beyond Limits" is all about the kids. "It gives them an opportunity to meet new people within their community, to expand their experiences and just have fun." For Liam, the experience really has been life-changing. At six years old, Liam participated for the first time. During the race, he spent a lot of time watching the legs of the runners on his team. After that day, Liam wanted to run too! In no time, Liam persevered, taught himself, and started running.

Shortly after the marathon, Wilmot received an email from Liam's mother. The email stated that while Liam couldn't communicate how much he enjoyed the half marathon, she was convinced he learned to run by watching his teammates. For him, something triggered an ability to put the pieces together and do something he might never have thought he could do. She added that Liam would be reliving that day in his dreams for years to come, and this year, Liam will cross that finish line once more.