

Young runners embrace marathon fervor in Chicago

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Many marathon runners often overlook the minute details that extend beyond the racecourse. They include the varied stories of the athletes' respective backgrounds, the motivations of volunteers — many who work at aid stations — and even the characteristics of a city's neighborhood and running communities.

There will be plenty of not-so-minute temptations to distract a runner's focus at the Chicago Marathon on Sunday. When runners hit mile 19 and turn from Ashland Ave. into the Pilsen neighborhood on 18th Street, they'll be greeted with the aroma of freshly made tortillas, a mariachi band and throngs of residents spilling onto the streets to cheer them on. Pilsen, a strong Hispanic community, is one of 29 diverse neighborhoods in Chicago touched by the marathon course, all which embrace the race's energy.

Further, runners will be greeted by an energetic group at a new aid station along mile 20 at Halsted St. The group at the station — added after runners endured dangerous heat levels during the 2007 race — will include parents and teachers involved in [Chicago Run](#), a new city-based youth running program. Kids [love](#) young to pass out fluids instead will be cheering and providing youthful exuberance to inspire the runners.

Bryan Traubert and Penny Pritzker founded the non-profit Chicago Run in December 2007 to facilitate youth running programs in the city's public schools. "They wanted to see if there was something they could do that would serve underserved communities in Chicago," says Alicia Gonzalez, Chicago Run's executive director and captain of the mile-20 aid station.

Chicago Run is modeled after the Mighty Milers, a program done by the New York Road Runners Foundation in New York City that promotes running among youth to combat child obesity. Chicago Run encourages its children in the second through fifth grades to run 15 minutes each day, three to five days per week. The program recruits staff from Chicago's public schools to serve as coaches by taking the kids out for their runs and helping log their miles into a database. "Kids get incentives as they log miles until they reach the goal of [completing the marathon distance]," Gonzalez says.

When Gonzalez joined the group in March, the program included 2,350 students from 12 elementary schools. It kicked off its second school year this fall with 4,000 kids from 18 schools that were selected for their cultural diversity. Gonzalez says that 85 percent of the students come from low-income backgrounds. Forty-five percent are African-American, 40.8 percent are Hispanic, 11 percent are Caucasian and 0.9 percent Asian American.

At mile 20 of the Chicago Marathon, Chicago Run supporters and participants will be lining the streets just steps from Walsh School, one of the program's member schools. Gonzalez says Chicago Run has recruited 300 volunteers, including parents and teachers from the program, to pass out water, Gatorade and bananas while the kids will perform dance and cheerleading routines on an outdoor stage.

"I figured this would be a great way for the kids to get exposure to the race," Gonzalez says. "Now they're running. Now they understand the concept of 26.2 miles because that's what they're running as their goal."

Chicago Run is not the only youth running program in the city. [Team M3~Chicago Student MentorRun](#) has been training and mentoring youth since the summer in preparation for this year's marathon. Team M3, one of the Chicago Marathon's participating charities, is a free program available to students who want to run at three city schools — Carver Military Academy, Foreman High School and North Grand High School. High school-age students are paired with mentors who guide their training and teach more than running skills. Students are bused to the city's downtown Lakefront on Saturday mornings to run with their mentors and also enjoy two training runs each week at their schools.

Cathy Braund, the director of Team M3, says the program is centered on training for and running the Chicago Marathon. "The students are aware of the record number of people running the Chicago Marathon and the caliber of the elite runners coming into town for this race," she says. "The students also get the opportunity before signing up for the program to volunteer at cheer stations along the course so they can experience the excitement a race this size generates."

Team M3 got its start in 2006 after students volunteered at an aid station during the 2005 Chicago Marathon to support the adults running the race for the Marilyn G. Rabb Foundation (MGR), which provides health, education and community programs for at-risk communities. "The students enjoyed the experience but really were motivated to run it," Braund says.

Small in its beginnings at Foreman High School, it has since grown to 68 students and 43 mentors who ran the 2008 Chicago Distance Classic Half Marathon on Aug. 10. Thirty-three students and 35 mentors are expected to run the marathon on Sunday.

For the Chicago Run and Team M3 programs, it's about the miles run and the lessons learned as they prepare for their



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Girls on the Run, Chicago's chapter of this national organization, brings running to girls ages 8 to 13. They train in a 12-week after-school program to complete a 3.1-mile run and encourage positive social, emotional, mental, spiritual and physical development. Some girls have run the Chicago marathon with Team Tiara, the program's charity group.

CARA (Chicago Area Runners Association) Road Scholars is modeled after the Students Run L.A. program where high school aged students train for the Los Angeles Marathon and receive mentoring and also learn how to improve their health. The Road Scholars train for the Chicago Distance Classic Half Marathon and the Chicago Marathon. CARA partners with the Rickover Naval Academy, a public school on the city's north side and hopes to offer their program to every Chicago public high school.

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