

Marathon of sisterly love



Philadelphia-based woman runs 26.2 miles out of love—and a desire for a cure.

by Shara Rutberg

The pain hit hardest at mile 18. Kara Ferguson had already passed the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, logging mile after mile along the Philadelphia Marathon course, through frigid rain, on the morning of Nov. 22, 2015. When she hit the steepest hill on the route, her leg muscles screamed with every step.

When things get tough, marathoners often look up and around for inspiration—to nature, to architecture or to the thousands of supporters who line the roads cheering them on. But Ferguson looked down.



On the inside of her wrist, written in black Sharpie, was "Tammy," her sister's name. A dozen other names crowded her arms. Each one represented

someone living with MS. “I may be hurting and freezing,” Ferguson remembers thinking, “but any one of these people on my arm would give anything to be out here doing this.”

Diagnosis hits the family

Ferguson’s sister, Tamela Fourshee, was diagnosed with MS in 2012; Fourshee was 28 years old and Ferguson was 21. The news devastated—and baffled—the family. “We panicked,” says Ferguson. “Our family really didn’t know anything about the disease or what to expect. I was terrified. I kept thinking: ‘Is she going to die?’ We didn’t know how to act. We didn’t know how to help,” she says.

Five years after the diagnosis, at a pharmaceutical company-sponsored dinner she attended with Fourshee, Ferguson’s grasp of what was happening to her sister “finally clicked,” she says. Through a detailed slide show, the presenters explained exactly how MS affects the body and motor skills. “Understanding the disease a little more took away some of my anxiety and fear,” she says, and helped her empathize with Fourshee’s daily pain and frustration.

Meeting other people living with MS at the dinner and later through the Society helped Fourshee, too. She says it helped her feel more connected to the greater MS community. “Everybody’s unique,” she says, “but we’re going through the same things.”

Eleventh-hour run

Just eight weeks before the 2015 Philadelphia Marathon, Ferguson decided to run the race for MS. She had finished the half-marathon the previous year, and completing a full marathon was on her bucket list. She wanted to run for Fourshee—and other people like her who lived with MS. She wanted to run for one person with MS for each of the 26 miles of the race.

Ferguson set up a fundraising page through the National MS Society’s Finish MS[®] program, which helps people who want to raise funds and awareness for the disease by participating in physically active events. After linking to the Finish MS page on her Facebook page, where she asked friends to send names of people she could honor during the race, she was floored by the response.

“It was really eye-opening to find out how many people I knew had people with MS in their lives,” she says. “I had no idea.” With each name, she learned about the person, and his or her family’s struggle with the disease. “It was inspiring.” While she ended up with just 13 names on her arms, she dedicated two miles to each individual on race day. And in just eight weeks, Ferguson raised \$750 for MS.



Kara Ferguson (left) with her sister, Tammy Fourshee, who has MS, as well as Tammy's husband, Anthony Fourshee, and son, Alex Fourshee, at the end of the race. Photo courtesy of Kara Ferguson

Funding and finishing

As Ferguson ran down Ben Franklin Parkway, with “the Rocky steps” at the Philadelphia Art Museum looming ahead of her, she wasn’t thinking of the pain in her legs; she was thinking of her sister. Right after Ferguson crossed the finish line, she spotted her sister on the sidelines in her wheelchair. She ran straight into Fourshee’s arms.

“The best part about the whole thing was hugging my sister at the finish,” she says. “I’d been thinking about her the whole race. It was a roller coaster, and that’s what her life is like. At points in the race I was doing well and feeling good. Other times, it felt like my legs were about to stop working, and that’s like when my sister says, ‘I’m afraid I’ll wake up someday and my legs or my arms won’t work.’ ”

Each step reminded her to take nothing for granted. “My sister struggles to get dressed in the morning,” says Ferguson. “I think enduring the emotions and the physical pain during the marathon was the closest I could ever come to understanding what she might be going through with MS. When we embraced, I knew she understood why I’d done it. It felt great.”

“It was very emotional at the finish line,” says Fourshee. “I was thinking, ‘All those miles, it’s amazing she even did it, and she did it for me.’ ”

The sisters say the marathon brought them even closer. And, says Ferguson, it changed the way she thinks about running. “What I saw as ‘just running’ before is different now. When I’m tired, I think about people with MS who can’t run. I say to myself, ‘If my legs work, I have to keep going.’ ”

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