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RunVermont Blog: Cathy Beaudoin

By Brian Klotz

Cathy Beaudoin is determined. A Ph.D., MBA, and CPA who has had successful careers both in business as an accountant and in academics as a professor at the University of Vermont, Cathy is also a prolific writer, endurance sport participant, and outdoor adventure enthusiast. Her accomplishments, however, did not come without setbacks.

About 15 years ago, Cathy was diagnosed with macular degeneration, the most common cause of blindness in the U.S. Not only did the disease take her central vision, she also developed an infection in her right eye – which had been the better of the two – which resulted in her needing to have the entire eye removed.

This doesn’t prevent her from competing, though. At one time a self-described “inactive couch potato,” Cathy, who lives in Burlington, VT, now embraces an active lifestyle, beginning to do triathlons in 2008.

“After I did a couple of sprint and Olympic distance races,” she says. “I knew the run was by far my weakest of the three disciplines, so I started running half marathons in 2010 in order to gain confidence in my run. I really like the distance, so I try to do at least one half marathon a year, if possible.” Cathy most recently finished the Hartford Half Marathon, a race that holds a special place in her heart since she grew up only 20 miles north of the city.

Like many runners with visual impairment, Cathy runs alongside sighted guides who assist her both in races and in training.

“Guides are a big part of why I keep running,” she says. “When someone volunteers to guide for me, there is a really special personal bond that is created. I am always grateful that I can get out and run, and I have met some really fascinating people along the way.

“Having guides to run with really makes me feel connected to the ‘normal’ world even though there is nothing normal about my world. Everyone wants to keep making deep human connections and when guides and blind runners come together, that usually happens.”

One issue Cathy has found, however, is common among athletes who use sighted guides: the difficulty of maintaining a proper training schedule. Adding to this is the fact that Cathy has a guide dog, Maggie, who needs to be cared for while she runs.

“My limitation is not the fact that I am blind per se,” Cathy explains. “It is only that being blind makes it more difficult to get in training runs of ten or more miles because I need both a guide to train with and a dog sitter in order to get in those longer training runs. The shorter stuff is easy to do because I can just use a treadmill.”

Due to scheduling and logistics as well as possible injuries or illness, runners who are visually impaired usually need a number of sighted guides to compete or train with, and finding them can be difficult.

Recognizing this need, the Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (MABVI) has established an online resource called United in Stride. Located online at unitedinstride.com, this is a free website created as a tool for matching runners, joggers, and walkers who are visually impaired with sighted guides all across North America. MABVI created the site in partnership with Richard Hunter, a nationally recognized Ironman triathlete, ultra-runner, and marathoner from Northern California who is himself visually impaired.

MABVI is well known for supporting runners with visual impairment through its Team With A Vision, an international team of runners and sighted guides who run the Boston Marathon as well as a number of other races throughout the year. They compete to raise funds and awareness for MABVI, which delivers professional, peer, and volunteer support to over 1,100 individuals with vision impairment each year.

United in Stride, having only been launched this past spring, has seen consistent growth but still needs more members, particularly in Vermont, where Cathy is searching for more guides. Therefore, United in Stride and MABVI are encouraging anyone who is interested to sign up at unitedinstride.com.

As for what Cathy is looking for in a guide: “I need a guide who does not mind running slow - usually around 11:30 mile pace. A lot of runners do not like running that slow.”

Cathy also needs a guide who would be able to pick her up and drop her off for training runs, as well as be aware that her guide dog Maggie may need to be dropped off somewhere for dog-sitting while they run.

Cathy’s current running goals? “I harbor a secret desire to run the New York City Marathon because I lived there from 1996 to 2003. But until I get my half marathon time closer to two and a half hours, I do not want to try it. I've never gone below two hours and forty eight minutes but honestly, I'm not far off.”

With more guides, however, Cathy could reach her goal. “I just never have enough guides to get in the ten, eleven, or twelve mile training runs. I have one guide who helps me do eight, nine and ten miles, but she cannot run with me every single weekend.”

Interested in helping Cathy and others with visual impairment achieve their goals? Or would you like a sighted guide for yourself? Sign up at unitedinstride.com!