

# Last Runner but Not Least

"That's the phone right there, the one he called me on," she said. "You can go over and touch it, if you like." Linda Down laughed, and pointed to the telephone, a black standard dial phone on the end table in her living room in Manhattan. She was referring to a call on the evening of last Oct. 25, the day after the New York City Marathon.

"My sister, Laura, was so cool about it," she said. Laura and Linda, age 26, are identical twins and share the apartment. "The phone rang," Linda continued, "and Laura picked it up and said, 'Uh huh, uh huh, uh huh,' and then she turned and handed me the phone. She said, 'Linda, it's the White House.'"

"And then, 'Hello, this is Ronald Reagan.' And I thought the stupidest thing. I thought, My God, he sounds just the way he does on television!"

President Reagan told Linda Down that he had seen her running in the marathon on television, that he was very moved and thought she was courageous, and invited her to lunch.

She went to Washington two days later for the luncheon that honored two other winners in the race — Alberto Salazar, the men's winner, and Grete Waitz, the women's champion. Each had run the 26.2-mile race in just over two hours.

Linda Down had run it in just over 11 hours — 11 hours 54 seconds.

Of 15,876 runners entered, 13,610 finished. Miss Down, wearing number W831 on the front of her purple sweatsuit, came in last, a full four hours after the next-to-last runner, a fireman.

The race, which wound through the five New York boroughs, had begun at 10:30 A.M. in front of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge on Staten Island. "I was in the back of the pack, and by the time I got over the bridge, no one else was in sight," Miss Down said. "I was the lone bird."

Many hours later, it had grown dark. Cleanup groups from the race sponsors had begun taking down the barricades and sweeping up the litter along the streets of Brooklyn, when they discovered that the race was not over. Here came a lone woman, on aluminum crutches that glinted under the street lights, making her way along the race route.

Swinging the crutches like ski poles, then pushing off with her legs, Miss Down, who was born with cerebral palsy, had to be careful not to place a crutch down accidentally on a discarded water cup or piece of paper.

"Then the crutch just slips right out



The New York Times

Linda Down

from under you," she said. She fell six times in the race.

From the 10-mile mark, she was followed by a television camera crew. At the 15th mile, she was met by her sister, mother and a few friends.

"And all along the way, people cheered — not just me, the others, too, of course," she said. "And that felt so good. A Hispanic family had driven over to meet me at the 20-mile banner, and they all stood around their car and clapped, and the little boy said, 'C'mon, you can make it.' Even though I was numb with pain, with that kind of support I had to make it." And clomping down the street I went."

Miss Down said she never meant to garner publicity for her run. She began an exercise program the year before to lose weight. She started with situps, then began long walks. When she noticed that there was a women's minimarathon in Central Park, she decided to try it.

"I had just finished my master's degree in social work at Adelphi," she said. Even though she was graduated magna cum laude, she had difficulty in a tight job market. "I wanted to do something positive, and running

seemed to be the perfect solution," she said.

She finished last in that race, but loved it. "I guess I'll always finish last," she said. "But that's not the point of marathon running."

The New York Marathon intrigued her, and she began training by running down Fifth Avenue. "All the doormen got to know me," she said. "They'd stick their heads out the door, 'Here she comes again.' And they rooted for me."

Although Miss Down landed a job — she is now coordinator of the Disabled Student Services at Adelphi — she still runs. She is a member of the Achilles Track Club, a group for disabled runners, which is affiliated with the New York Road Runners Club, and plans to run in the New York Marathon next month. Her running has improved so much that she hopes to cut last year's time by three hours. But before that, she will participate in the Avon Half Marathon on Saturday in Central Park.

"The last year has been incredible," she said. "It started with television and newspapers taking an interest in me, and then the White House. You know, one of the biggest thrills was meeting Salazar and Waitz. Such great runners. I remember Alberto asking me what marathon races I had run before this. I said 'Well, just a minimarathon.' He looked at me and said, 'Oh.'"

"And then I got all these wonderful letters, people telling me how I had given them inspiration. Groups invited me to speak in several parts of the country. And people on the street stopped me. In the checkout line of a grocery store a man said, 'Aren't you the one who ran in the marathon?' I said yes. He said he had suffered depression, but seeing me run in the marathon gave him added drive to get out of it."

Miss Down says she will never forget that race, and crossing the finish line shortly after 9:30 at night.

"My arms were black and blue from the jarring of the cuffs of the crutches, my body ached, my kidneys throbbed and I was sweaty and dizzy," she said. "I dragged myself into the back seat of my friend's car and fell back, and I started to cry. It was wonderful."

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