

... the competitors

Linda Down — No handicap too great



Special photo — Dawn Peters

Linda Down, at the finish in 1983.

By **BILL MADDEN**
Staff Writer

Linda Down is a celebrity in the running world. The 27-year old Manhattan resident completed the past two New York City Marathons and was an honored guest of President Ronald Reagan after crossing the tape in the 1982 race. She was pictured on the front page of The New York Times and was swamped with interviews from intrigued media people.

If you're asking what separates Down from the rest of the thousands of marathon runners, the answer is very simple. Linda Down was born with cerebral palsy.

Gripping crutches and wearing leather gloves, Down has run into the national spotlight and garnered the respect and admiration of millions. Call it courage, call it determination, call it remarkable. Call it what you may, but Down is a very special person.

Down will be one of hundreds of runners entered in Sunday's second annual Helen Hayes Hospital Classic Run, sponsored by The Journal-News, beginning in West Haverstraw. The event will generate funds for the hospital. Down plans to compete in the 10-kilometer (6.2-mile) race.

The thought of running a marathon was far from a lifelong ambition for Down. In 1981, she watched televised accounts of the 1981 New York City Marathon and decided that very day to run in the 1982 race. It was spur of the moment.

She worked into shape with regular exercise and eventually began running in the streets of New York. Up Fifth Avenue and down 105th Street, she jogged. Dodging rush hour crowds and running through the loneliness of darkness, Down prepared for her big day.

In May of 1982, she ran and completed the 6.2-mile L'Eggs Mini Marathon in approximately two hours. When marathon day arrived, Down fought through a steady rain and crossed the finish line some 11 hours later. Despite swollen hands and black and blue forearms, Down was thrilled with her accomplishment.

She was later honored at the White House and bombarded by an inundation of media interest. She finished last year's marathon in less than nine hours and has continued to run for reasons of self-satisfaction and inspiration to others.

Sunday at the Helen Hayes run, Down will among the featured participants.

"Part of the reason I'm running at Helen Hayes is that I took driving lessons there in 1979," said Down, the Coordinator of Disabled Students Services at Adelphi University and a free-lance writer. "I like the running and the fact that it is for a worthy cause. That's part of the impetus that makes me run."

Down, who earned her masters degree in social work at Adelphi University, was recently accepted to run in the London Marathon in May and will be accompanied by twin sister Laura on Sunday. Laura will run the one-mile Fun Run.

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