

Achilles lends a hand

Club brings world's disabled to run marathon

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ERNIE BRENNER still sees the one man's red shirt. Still sees the four armed robbers brandishing weapons, shouting, "Sit down!" and, "We want your money!" And Brenner still winces as he recalls the frenetic few seconds of a female employee's screams before the gunshots exploded in the offices of his Johannesburg, South Africa, car rental business.

The rest of that April morning five years ago is blank. Brenner was knocked unconscious by two bullets that pierced his neck and shattered two cervical vertebrae at the top of his spinal cord. After he was rushed to nearby Milpark Hospital — "the country's best trauma unit," Brenner says — he remained there for the next five months, his wife Elinor, his three grown sons and extended family fearful he would not survive. Even after he regained consciousness two weeks into his hospital stay, there was a grueling recovery and rehabilitation process for the then 65-year-old Brenner and ultimately the sobering reality that he would be forever confined to a wheelchair.

"It was the most traumatic period of my life," says Brenner, his New York City Marathon bib number in a nearby plastic bag while hundreds of other runners stream by him at the Jacob Javits Center to register for today's race. "I cried for two weeks after my release."

Andile Zulu shifts constantly in the lobby lounge chair at midtown's Roger Smith Hotel while his high school classmate Wandile Hdebe, 17, squints curiously at his surroundings. Both are still recovering from the long flight from the coastal town of Durban, South Africa, where they are students at the Ethembeni School. The school, established in 1984, caters exclusively to students with disabilities. Zulu and Hdebe are both nearly blind and have suffered vision impairment since birth.

As tourists wander in and out of the hotel's front entrance, one couple from Barcelona stops to ask Zulu if he's in town to run today's marathon. Both young men politely smile, the rapid-fire Spanish as foreign to them as the towering skyscrapers just outside the hotel.

"Yes," Zulu says softly to the couple when a bystander translates the question.

Neither Zulu nor Hdebe had ever traveled outside of Africa before last week and only Hdebe had flown in an airplane once before, to neighboring Namibia. But neither seems daunted by the prospect of joining 37,000 other runners in Staten Island today and winding through the five-borough, 26.2-mile marathon course.

"The most important thing is to finish the race, to not lose perseverance," the 18-year-old Zulu says, his irises rolling behind his eyelids as he speaks. "For me, this is a rare experience."

beni students, and their backgrounds are as disparate as can be imagined — Brenner is a white, upper middle class business professional while the two teenage kids are poor and uncertain about whether their goals to be a computer programmer (Zulu) and teacher (Hdebe) will be realized. But they all share one common thread: They will be running today thanks to the Achilles Track Club, the New York non-profit organization founded in 1983 by Dick Traum that helps disabled individuals to "participate in mainstream athletics" worldwide. Achilles

now has chapters in over 60 countries, including one in South Africa that began in 2000.

Zulu and Hdebe join 11 other Ethembeni students as part of a school team enrolled in the marathon. After a chance 1998 meeting between Achilles founder Traum and Braam Mouton, the headmaster of Ethembeni, Achilles soon had a foothold in South Africa. Ethembeni has no formal athletics program, so Achilles offers one of the few opportunities for students to weave athletics into their education.

"We have what is called the Comrades Marathon in South Africa, a 90-kilometer (56-mile) race, and part of the course goes past our school," says Mouton. "Dick was visiting South Africa and taking in the race when he stopped by. We had six students run the (New York) marathon in 2000 and we've built on that each year. This is such an exciting time for these students who come from nothing."

Brenner first heard of the Achilles program through his son Terry, 34, a New York City attorney who lives in Stamford, Conn. After Terry Brenner raised money for Achilles by running the New York Marathon three straight years (2002-4), he and his two older brothers, Ian and Jeffrey, began to coax their father to enter. The elder Brenner was reluctant at first because of his weak

physical state, but more importantly his bitterness over the fallout of the shooting — two of the four robbers were arrested after the incident but never tried.

"The South African police botched the investigation, said the blood at my offices didn't match my blood type. I was never allowed to identify the men in a lineup. That's South Africa," Brenner says, before adding that corruption and bribery may have played a role in the proceedings.

His son, Terry, agrees that a "failed criminal justice system" is to blame. He and his brother, Ian, who were living in North America (Ian in Toronto) at the time of the shooting, traveled back and forth to South Africa four times within four months to monitor their father's rehabilitation. The third son, Jeffrey, lives in Jo-

hannesburg.

"I will never give up my anger toward those men. You can't imagine the emotional state of knowing you will be in a wheelchair forever," Ernie Brenner says.

He points to the scars on the left side of his neck from the shooting. "But the greatest thing I ever did was to get into sports. When (Terry) approached me in 2005 to do (the marathon), he sent me an E-mail about a father who had helped his disabled son run the marathon. That to me was Terry sending a silent message. 'Dad, if you want to do it, we'll take you.'"

A year after the father-and-three-sons team completed the marathon — with Ernie operating a hand-crank, three-wheeled bicycle using only his right hand — the Brenner men are prepared to complete the race again today, though this likely will be the last time for Ernie.

Zulu and Hdebe, on the other hand, view their first New York Marathon as the beginning of what may be an annual pilgrimage to the big city across the pond.

"It seems impressive, being cheered by so many people along the streets of New York," Zulu says. "That is what I hear about. What comes to mind is this happiness that you are being complimented along the way. I think that is something I would do again. And that's a big thanks to Mr. Traum and Achilles for making it possible."

On the adjacent lounge chair, Wandile Hdebe nods in agreement and smiles. "I would like to run again, too," he says.



ROBERT SABO DAILY NEWS
Ernie Brenner is ready to wheel way through New York for second time since being shot in South Africa in 2001.

Brenner has never met the two Ethem-