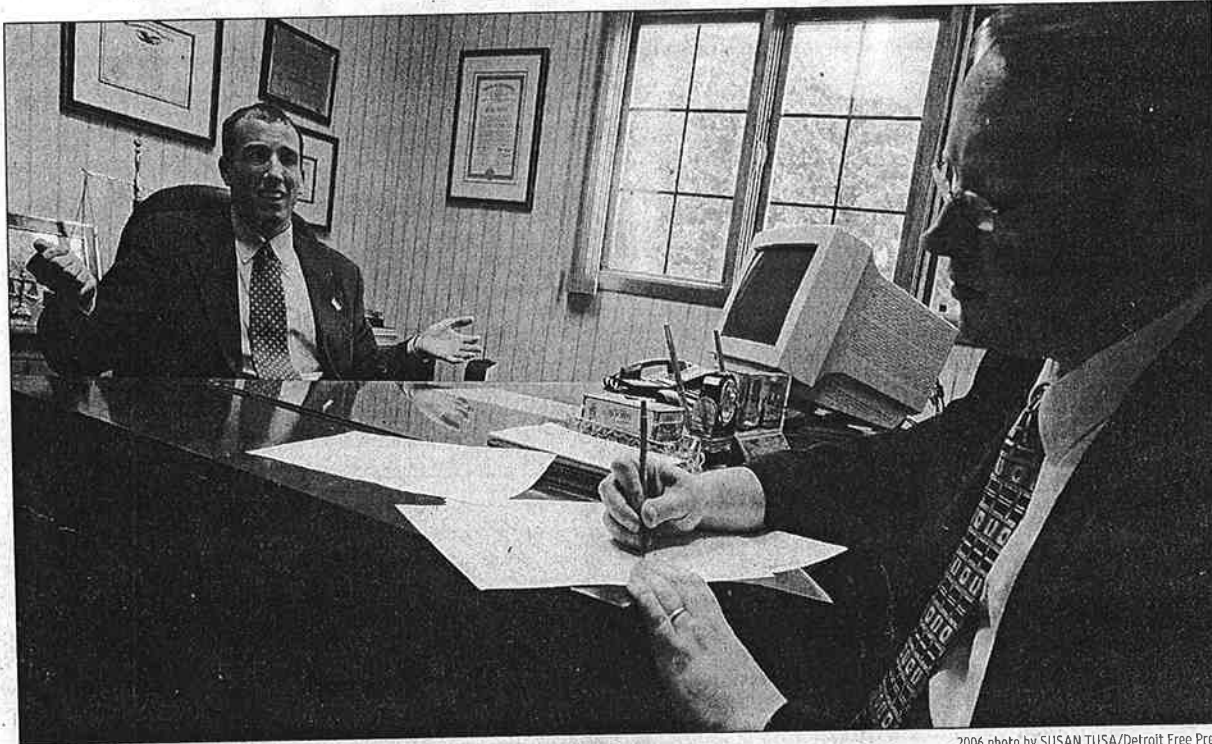


Club turns blind lawyer into a marathon man



2006 photo by SUSAN TUSA/Detroit Free Press

Richard Bernstein, left, and David Cohen grade papers of students from the class Bernstein teaches at the University of Michigan. At one time, the Birmingham lawyer never thought of being an athlete. But now he's training for an ironman triathlon in August in Hawaii.

By KIM NORTH SHINE
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

About three years ago attorney Richard Bernstein, who was born blind and had never entertained the idea of being an athlete, was introduced to a running group.

That group, the New York-based Achilles Track Club, provided training and volunteers who have helped him run six marathons.

Along the way, Bernstein has adopted a way of life that has transformed him and everything he does.

"It is so magnificent. I can't express to you how much of a difference running has made in my life," said Bernstein, 33, of Birmingham. "It is so challenging. It is so difficult. But it is so important people do this."

Bernstein — who works in the Farmington Hills family law practice started

by his father, Samuel Bernstein — helped start a Michigan chapter of the Achilles Track Club. It formed in January in partnership with Friendship Circle, an Oakland County nonprofit that provides creative approaches to helping families of children with special needs.

Bernstein, who flew to New York for weekly training, is energetic when he talks about giving people without his financial means the opportunity to join the club.

"The way this changes people's lives is immeasurable," said Bernstein, who next tackles an ironman triathlon in August in Honolulu.

The new chapter began training about a month ago on a trail in West Bloomfield.

Two dozen runners are participating, said Bassie

For information

The Michigan chapter of the Achilles Track Club needs volunteers and athletes. Schedules for volunteers are flexible. The group practices at 9 a.m. Sundays at the West Bloomfield Trail.

For information, call 248-788-7878, extension 213.

For more on the club, go to www.achillestrackclub.org.

Shemtov of West Bloomfield, who cofounded Friendship Circle with her husband, Rabbi Levi Shemtov.

"It just keeps growing," Bassie Shemtov said. "When someone hears about it, they say they want to join. ... The volunteer response has been amazing."

The youngest runner is 9. Most are in their teens. And a handful of adults are in training, too. Each has a volunteer, and the goal is to have some athletes run or

walk the Detroit Free Press Marathon on Oct. 21. Most of the club's participants have developmental disabilities or disorders such as autism.

"A lot of these athletes are kids who have accepted they'll never be a part of sports and athletic endeavors," Bernstein said. "Imagine when they get to go back to school and say, 'I'm training for a marathon or I ran a marathon.' Imagine what this will do for their confidence? It really has an impact on how you see yourself and what you're able to do."

Even more, he said, is the confidence that comes from accomplishing a goal as demanding as a marathon and learning that "if you can make it through a marathon you can work through any obstacle in life."

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