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With cheers and prayers: Wilton nun prepares for 25th NYC Marathon

By Lois H. Alcosser



Sister Gladys Murphy of the School Sisters of Notre Dame on Belden Hill Road, will be competing in her 25th New York City Marathon. Since 2002, she has

competed using this specialized racing wheelchair.

"It's exciting, it's thrilling! The cheering of the crowds, that's what keeps you going."

So declared Sister Gladys Murphy of the School Sisters of Notre Dame who at age 75 is preparing for her 25th New York City Marathon, which takes place on Nov. 4.

Since 2002, she's had to use a hand-crank wheelchair, which she says is harder than walking or running, because it's a constant push and pull, bad for the back muscles. But Sister Gladys doesn't let that stop her. She's a member of the Achilles Track Club, long a part of the 26-mile marathon for people with disabilities.

"There are people on crutches, people with cerebral palsy, blind people on a tether, and lately, there are more and more soldiers back from Iraq, whose arms or legs have been blown off," she said.

Sister Gladys joined the Achilles Track Club in 1989. It was started in 1983 by Dick Traum, the first amputee to participate in and finish the New York City Marathon; he had lost a leg in an accident when he was a young man. Now there are chapters all over the world.

Her heart led her to Achilles, in more ways than one. Her doctor had diagnosed angina and wanted her to lose weight. She was teaching at a school in Manhattan and started running around the schoolyard every morning. She noticed joggers running along the East River and they told her about the New York City Roadrunners. "In 1981, I was running around the schoolyard and in 1982, I put myself in the marathon."

Sister Gladys has been a nun for 56 years. She says she knew from the sixth grade that's what she wanted to be and entered a convent at age 19. Born in Roxbury, Mass., she said, "The sisters who were my teachers were my inspiration." She taught for 43 years in parochial schools all along the East Coast, pre-kindergarten to eighth grade.

She says that being part of Achilles is like belonging to a family. "We have races all year and it's done something for me emotionally. When you see little children using walkers to race, it's inspiring."

Every month, she goes into Manhattan for a race in Central Park. In 2001, she was taken to the hospital with chest pains. "I thought I was having a heart attack, but it wasn't, so I signed myself out and took the train home."

In 2005, she was headed for a practice session and fell on the sidewalk, twice. Despite the fact that she was covered with blood, her glasses were broken and her nose was all cut up, she went to the practice. "It ruined my knees, but the rest of me is healthy, and my knees aren't bad enough for a replacement."

"But I couldn't keep racing if it wasn't for my volunteers. They have to run to keep up with me. When I get stuck on a hill, they pull me up." During the marathon, her three guides are Liza Ozzano from Darien, and Jillian Flynn and Meg Roach from New York. Ms. Flynn has been a guide for Sister Gladys for 15 years.

Ms. Ozzano has been escorting Sister Gladys for three years. "Achilles people are just unbelievable," she said. "Each person has a story. There's a runner who had a stroke at age 14, a man without legs who races on a skateboard."

Most of the runners do the whole race, which starts in Staten Island, goes over the Verrazano, Pulaski and 59th Street bridges, and covers all the boroughs. It takes Sister Gladys five to six hours and she admits she's really tired when she finishes. The New York City Marathon was started in 1970. For the first three or four years, the participants just ran around Manhattan. Now the course takes participants through all five boroughs.

Ms. Ozzano said, "We all get medals, and once we had a police escort for the bus ride to Staten Island. And we three guides wear shirts that say Sister Gladys!"

At the School Sisters of Notre Dame, on Belden Hill Road, Sister Gladys used to work with sisters with Alzheimer's, "but there aren't too many of them any more. I do odds and ends, anything nobody wants to do; the infirmary snack rooms and kitchen. I fill up 23 salt and pepper shakers every day."

Sister Gladys has a hearty laugh, twinkling blue eyes and an amazing spirit, this reporter observed in a short visit. She has one more practice before the Nov. 4 race. She's looking forward to her 25th marathon. "It's like a party day. There are people from all over the world. We take the train to New York and we pick up a wheelchair at Dick Traum's place. Some runners have their own, but they cost about \$2,000."



Members of the Achilles Track Club help and encourage Sister Gladys along the way.

Not all the School Sisters approve of what Sister Gladys does. "They tell me I'm too old. But I take the map of the race and hang it on the wall so they can follow me. I know they're praying for me that day and they're just waiting for me to come back through that front door."

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