



GOING THE EXTRA MILE (OR 26.2)

“Persevering” is the 12th grade character flag trait. Appropriately assigned, it takes persistence to achieve all the requirements for graduation at the Academy and to endure the new-found rigors of college life. But beyond high school and college and into “adult” life, the 15 character traits displayed on the flags continue to take on importance when tackling new challenges and opportunities. Such is the case in the story of Frank Townsend (father of Quinton ’22 and Joshua ’24), a dedicated runner who has made it his personal life goal to run a full or half marathon in all 50 of the United States.

Townsend began running four years ago when a friend and co-worker encouraged him to come out and participate in a 5K race with him. Meeting other people and seeing runners of many abilities made him realize there was more to running than just winning the chase — many of the people running this race merely wanted to finish. Others wanted to come out and have fun with friends or family. Still others chose to run for a cause, in memory of an important friend they had lost or in honor of a family member fighting an illness. Regardless of the reason, few were hesitant to share their story and the personal goals they were trying to achieve.

Townsend, too, discovered he had his own goals. “I try to live life and do things with purpose,” he said. “I lost my father to a heart attack when I was 21 years old and this inspired me to get out and get healthy. Within a week of running the initial 5K, I had caught the ‘bug.’” Townsend’s family started to come out to support him, and he continued to build his running circle by encouraging others to join the challenge or to volunteer at events.

In the first year, Townsend gave his sneakers a workout by running upwards of 52 5K events

and a few longer 10K races. He was proud of his accomplishments thus far, but it was time to face a new challenge — to complete a marathon. “As a kid, I always dreamed of doing one,” he explained, “but I never thought I would. Marathons were intimidating.” But Townsend persevered and took on the Harrisburg Marathon (with the help of a good friend who supported him by biking next to him from mile 16 to the end). And yes — he finished it!

“My message is truly, if you can believe it, you can achieve it. You HAVE to believe in yourself. And at some point, that’s eventually what I did. I realized that as long as I had confidence that I would finish, my body would will me on to finish,” he added.

During his travels, Townsend happened to sign up and run the Virginia Beach half marathon shortly thereafter. He says he thought to himself, mid-race, “This is scenic!” and started to consider how he might be able to not only meet new runners and hear their stories, but also experience the delight of running in new locales. Then he happened to read a book about a runner who completed 50 races in 50 states and his goal became clear — he would do the same. As of this magazine going to print, Townsend has checked 21 states off his list.

Some marathons were more memorable than others. “In Nashville, there was a tornado! I was running along and I looked up and the sky was dark and swirling,” he recalled. “Sure enough, there was a tornado nearby. They cancelled the race because of it. And when I went to the airport to fly home, we had to travel west to go east to avert it!”

Townsend ran the New Orleans Marathon, only a few years after Hurricane Katrina, to see how the town was rehabilitating. He was

amazed to see that many areas were still abandoned, their buildings still displaying the “X” marks spray-painted on their sides by emergency workers during search and rescue efforts after the storm.

And in 2010, Townsend ran the New York City Marathon. He had always dreamed of running this race and was delighted to be one of 45,000 people granted a bid from an entry pool of over 100,000. Two days before the event, he caught the flu. Because he knew the odds of getting a future bid were limited, he chose to run the race anyway. “You can do anything if you put your mind to it,” he reiterated.

Townsend works hard to balance his passion for running with an active family life and work schedule. His wife and sons are now runners, too, and many times, they join him at shorter races. For the longer out-of-town marathons in which his family does not accompany him, he still tries to engage his sons. Before I go,” he said, “I always make a point of looking at state maps with them and showing them where I will be. We identify the state capitals, and we look online to see what is interesting about that particular state. And when I get home, the boys love to wear my medals.”

“It’s been quite a journey so far,” he concluded. “It is tough, but like most of the great things in life, you have to work hard for them. It’s doing the difficult things that make people stand out... being someone who can go that extra mile.”

Right: Frank Townsend and his sons, Joshua ’24 (left) and Quinton ’22, at the 2011 Harrisburg Jingle Bell 5K run.

