

Gusting

THROUGH THE ELEMENTS

by Bri Kilroy • photography by Two Eagles Marcus

“Do you want to know the exact number?” offered Sarah Gust when asked about her weight prior to embarking toward a healthier lifestyle. Most women won’t give that information to their friends let alone an article to be read by the masses, yet Gust, 37, refuses to hide a number that marks how far she has come since her journey started 2014. “Four hundred sixteen pounds,” she answered.



SARAH ON RUNNING:

Outside or Inside?

Outside.

Favorite area to run?

The Fred Meijer Pioneer Trail.

Morning or night?

The earlier, the better

Favorite pre-run snack?

Toast with peanut butter and banana.

Favorite post-run snack?

Core Power Chocolate protein shake.

Thoughts while running?

My schedule or how amazing the other runners are doing.

Mantra?

Get comfortable with the uncomfortable.

The number is hard to believe looking at the radiant, pixie-haired Gust in her fitting running jacket and “the first pair of jeans [she’s] worn in years.”

Two years ago, Gust’s size prevented her from going places due to worrying about whether or not she would fit. Exhausted by the constant spatial awareness she had to endure during activities like getting on a bus or a plane or sitting in a booth at a restaurant, Gust chose to have bariatric surgery.

“I wanted to live a life,” she said, recalling the overwhelming barriers that posed as an inconvenience and challenge to everyday tasks.

Although bariatric surgical procedures are often the first major step toward better health, Gust met post-surgery life with complications that kept her at a physical standstill for almost six months before she could begin working out. The opportunity for health pulled at Gust as she healed and she joined a support group to combat the emotional toll the process was taking on her.

The encouraging environment gave Gust the strength to cope patiently and practice self-compassion. She remembers being brought back to the surface after a group member advised, “As long as you can go to bed saying ‘I’ve done everything I can today’ then you’re all right.”

“It helps me acknowledge what my day was like,” Gust said. “As long as I can say ‘yes [I did my best],’ I’m okay with it.”

As for the times Gust admitted to answering “no” to the statement, she reassured it doesn’t mean failure and the response can be as simple as accepting you didn’t do your best and will try again tomorrow. Her insight encourages us to try our hardest, and her humanity reminds us not to punish ourselves for imperfection.

When Gust’s body healed to the point where she could start incorporating exercise, she pursued her vision of health by walking on the treadmill. She didn’t imagine she would evolve into a runner from the routine, but the curiosity of whether or not she could run sauntered into her mind one day; she found herself pumping up the treadmill’s speed until her legs answered by breaking into a run.

“I ran for 30 seconds,” Gust said. “It was probably awful, but I thought ‘If I can have the courage to run for 30 seconds, what else can I do?’”

The half-minute of running left her with a lasting sense of power; Gust was determined to become a runner but wasn’t sure where to start. She went to Gazelle Sports to buy a pair of running shoes “because that’s what you do,” and met Gazelle Sport’s 5K training camp coordinator, Michelle Stahl.

Stahl invited Gust to one of the camp’s training sessions. Despite the awful weather, Gust was so eager

to run with others that she dressed in what passed as winter running clothes from her then wardrobe and went to the session.

“I showed up in my big ol’ puffer jacket in the 12-degree weather,” Gust laughed. The imagery is humorous and familiar to anyone whose running story crosses with a Michigan winter. Gust braved the elements, finding motivation among the group camaraderie and the confidence this new terrain gave her.

“I’ve run in crappy weather, and I can keep going,” Gust said. “It becomes me against the elements.” Gust described how a recent run on icy, unplowed sidewalks gave her a euphoric sense of self-assurance that her body wasn’t going to let her fall. “I can trust what my body will do and don’t have to worry about it like I used to.”

Gust said the journey was slow for her, and it was difficult to be surrounded by seasoned runners as she altered between 30 seconds of running and 90 seconds of walking during training; however, she doesn’t think she’d be where she is now without her running group.

Gust is at a place she would never have envisioned if you told her about it two years ago. In addition to her full-time job at Fifth Third Bank and aside from being a 2016 Fifth Third River Bank Road Warrior, she has two 10Ks and a few 5Ks beneath her feet and is planning on dashing in the Gazelle Girl 5K on April 17.

She set her sights on conquering the Fifth Third River Bank 25K but altered her goal when she encountered a strained hip flexor during a training run. Not wanting to mistake weakness for injury, she hesitated to tell her coach of the pain but valued the honesty within her team and expressed her discomfort.

“Once you start understanding different types of pain, you start to understand what’s an issue and what’s not,” Gust said.



Sarah Gust, 2016 Fifth Third River Bank Road Warrior, shed over 200 pounds since her running journey began in 2014.

“

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Gust adapted to the issue by taking a break from running so she can heal by Gazelle Girl and shifting her sights from the River Bank 25K to the 10K on May 14. She plans on crossing the finish lines of the Grand Rapids Half Marathon and Fifth Third Capital City River Run Half Marathon this fall. She plans to celebrate running the River Bank 10K and her other running successes by getting a tattoo of her heaviest weight in Roman numerals to represent how far she’s come in this life-changing and life-giving journey.

While you’re thinking about how far you want to go, remember to acknowledge and applaud how far you’ve already come. Let that power launch you into facing challenges you’re unsure of such as signing up for the River Bank Run at www.53RiverBankRun.com or taking on the year with newfound courage.

Bri Kilroy, pictured right with Gust, is a Grand Valley and AmeriCorps alumna who learned to type through vigorous Mavis Beacon trainings. She also passes as an artist, illustrator and author of this bio.