

Lace Up

with Liz Lancaster

by Bri Kilroy • photography by Two Eagles Marcus



Hastings resident Liz Lancaster learned to swim at age 75. The reason she learned is even more surprising than the age she learned how to do it.

“I wanted to do a triathlon,” said Lancaster, beaming as she recalled the goal she made for herself four years ago. “I decided I’m going to do a triathlon while I’m 75.”

It’s not the answer you would expect from the now 79-year-old grandmother of eight and the great-grandmother of eight more, yet the senior powerhouse already had a lifetime of marathons beneath her feet before taking on Kalamazoo’s Gull Lake Sprint Triathlon in 2011. What’s astounding is Lancaster doesn’t even have a full lifetime of running behind her.

Lancaster began running at age 40 while working as a registered nurse at Pennock Hospital.

“I never take the elevator unless I’m carrying something,” Lancaster said, mentioning that she encouraged her husband, Allen Lancaster, to do the same. “But I got winded going up the stairs.”



Refusing to be conquered by three flights of stairs and having her health awareness heightened after her father died from a ruptured aneurysm, Lancaster commenced the journey that others often plan but repeatedly neglect: building stamina. She began jogging short distances outside, giving keen attention to her body’s response and noting the balance between pushing through challenges and pushing too hard.

She remembers running with her husband up Hastings’ bounty of hills and the strength his cheering gave her as he gently placed his hand on her back and “pushed me up [the hill] shouting, ‘You can do it!’”

Endurance didn’t arrive overnight, and there were days when exhaustion made Lancaster dread lacing up and going running, especially after spending hours on her feet working full-time at the hospital. Those days, she would remind herself of how good a run made her feel when it was finished.

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Liz on Running:

Outside or inside?

Lancaster: Outside.

Favorite area to run?

The country and in the snow.

Music?

No

Favorite pre-run snack?

Peanut butter and banana on a bagel.

Favorite post-run snack?

Just about anything.

Thoughts while running?

My family.

distances, she has no intention of retiring her running shoes. She is the oldest member of Hastings' Trilanders' Multisport Club and trains with them every Sunday before church.

"They're such a neat group of runners and are so encouraging," Lancaster said. She explained that she has been discouraged with her speed this past year and her friends in the group silence her doubts by saying "Liz, at least you're out there."

Lancaster is in awe of the attention she's received from running, including being named Michigan Runner magazine's Female Senior Runner of the Year in 2003. She's surprised when her friends tell her she's an inspiration because she feels most influenced by them and their determination.

"I have lots of friends that do more than I do," she said humbly as she spoke of her friends Diane Ebaugh, who competed in Iron Man, and Paul Moore ran many races with her.

The encouragement of her husband, family and the unmatched friends she's made through running is Lancaster's strongest motivator. She recently signed up to run her fourth Gazelle Girl Half Marathon on April 17 and looks forward to the exciting atmosphere of the women and girls only race. She's not in any hurry to beat her personal record of 2:09, but she wants to finish in less than three hours with a run/walk combo.

Lancaster's advice to others who hesitate to start running stems from the same boost her friends gave her when her doubts slowed her down: just get out there and get started.

"You go to have fun. You go to do your best. Relax. Don't depend on everybody else," she said. "Even if you're just out there walking, do what you can do."

Remember that, Grand Rapids, as you eye future 5K, 10K, River Bank, half-marathon, and full marathon races and the greatest goals you plan to accomplish this year. Cheer for yourself, cheer for others and "just get out there and get started."

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"I've stayed inside and just felt horrible," Lancaster said about the days when lethargy got the upper hand. Avoiding that feeling drives her to get out and run during times she doesn't want to.

The following year, running scampered its way into Lancaster's life as a way to relax, reflect and connect with her kids and grandkids. Running in races didn't slide onto her radar until her son's high school track team was at risk of being discarded due to low funding. As a part of fundraising efforts, Lancaster signed up for Hastings Summerfest, an annual festival that features community events including a 5K and 10K. She recruited friends to pledge a certain number of dollars for every mile she ran.

Lancaster stretched the 10K distance a mile further to meet her fundraising goal, clocking in 7.2 miles during her first race. After that, she was hooked on all races, from 5K to 26.2-mile marathons, taking place everywhere from Los Angeles to Boston.

"I've done so many I've lost count," she said, guessing that she's "probably done 15 or so" marathons, including the Boston Marathon in 2004 and 2007 since she started running. She also has a history of personal records in the Detroit Free Press/Flagstar Bank Marathon, the Fifth Third River Bank Run, the Bayshore Marathon and a cabinet holding trophies, medals and plaques from a mountain of others.

Although Lancaster admits she can't run as fast as she used to and alternates running and walking over her



Bri Kilroy 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.