

Big Running Shoes to Fill

Fran Maxwell 27 January 2016

Big running shoes to fill, a seemingly contradictory statement about a diminutive woman but true nevertheless. She is Heather McDanel, founder of Students Run Philly Style. This program allows youth ages 12 – 18 to realize their capacity for success through mentorship and distance running. At the helm of this organization since its inception in 2004, McDanel is moving on to new opportunities.

I had the chance to meet with Heather early in November, in the height of running season. She squeezed me into her busy schedule and we chatted at the offices of Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC) where the program is housed as part of the nonprofit National Nurses Center Consortium (NNCC). Heather was sporting her trademark Students Run Philly Style windbreaker, jeans and, of course, running shoes.

A typical day for Heather is hard to describe with the exception of how it starts: exercise. This particular day began with both a run and a swim. Her exercise lifestyle displays a commitment to the principles of the program she has built and represents. This is a large part of the success of Students Run Philly Style: the leader's core belief in the mission.

Students Run Philly Style was built to emulate a successful mentoring program in Los Angeles where youth struggle with gang involvement. Eleven years ago, McDanel was approached by Susan Sherman, president and CEO of the Independence Foundation. Sherman knew of the L.A. program and felt it was a perfect fit for Philadelphia and consistent with the mission of the Independence Foundation. As a private philanthropy organization with a strong focus on health, the Foundation supports organizations that provide services to people who do not ordinarily have access to them thereby enriching the life experiences of the residents of the Philadelphia area. Sherman felt that McDanel, a runner with an interest in urban youth and a master's in public health, was the perfect individual to author a grant submission to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). RWJF grants offer awardees four years of matching grant funding. McDanel made a successful pitch and won a very prestigious RWJF grant, a grant that is only given to five percent of applicants. Although McDanel thought her involvement would end with the grant submission, she in fact became the founder of the resulting organization and the rest is history.

Targeting youth in north and west Philadelphia, Students Run Philly Style has made a decisive impact on obesity and asthma within this population. Under the tutelage of approximately 200 volunteers and mentors, 900 students in the past year have been coached to run the May Broad

Street Run, the largest ten mile run in the country (40,000 participants). In addition, approximately 400 participants from this group went on to run either the full or half marathon in Philadelphia in November. Back in 2004, there were only fifty program participants!

By teaching youth the skills necessary to meet these running objectives, success inside the classroom has also benefited. In addition to the furnished pairs of running shoes and gratis running registrations, participants also have access to free SAT preparation courses, summer internships and college visitation days. Students must continue to display commitment to the core values of courage, effort and respect to stay in good standing of the program. McDanel is not flexible on this requirement.

All of this is achieved under McDanel's leadership of a full-time staff of three and one part-time employee. With a budget of \$1 million, one of the key challenges is to maintain the fiscal viability of the program. Today, revenue is derived approximately forty percent from foundations, 35 – 40 percent from corporations and 15 – 20 percent from individuals. While not a stand-alone nonprofit, Students Run Philly Style maintains its own Advisory Board, its own by-laws and governance.

McDanel professes her love of building. Whereas Students Run Philly Style was the second such program in the country, there are now about nine similar organizations based in Chicago, New Orleans, Cleveland,

Boston (two), and Washington, D.C. McDanel was consulted by these organizations as they established themselves, and these groups have formed a national network in which McDanel participates.

When asked about other organizations and leaders that she admires, McDanel cites Stephen Gregg, Executive Director of SquashSmarts. Not unlike Students Run Philly Style, SquashSmarts "keeps Philadelphia public school students in school, in shape and on track for graduation."

Gregg has been an integral part of this organization since 2004. McDanel admires his mindfulness and how he leads by example.

Since McDanel learned through experience, she would not have done anything differently in her successful building of the program. She does concede that fundraising might have come more easily if she better understood the value of branding for marketing purposes. Her proudest moment was the ten-year anniversary celebration at the Art Museum. Here the culmination of all of her efforts was recognized. In attendance was the first marathon program participant who is now 24 years of age and a cancer survivor.

But having built a successful program, McDanel now recognizes that she has fulfilled her mission. She sees it as time to pass the baton to a new leader to 'shine up the apple.' No doubt McDanel will be equally successful in her next adventure.

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