

Sweat Equity

Couple runs to provide clean water in Africa

By John Kinmonth



There are numerous ways to raise money for charity. Tea parties with little sandwiches, silent art auctions and bowling tournaments are all proven methods to end up with an oversized check for almost any nonprofit organization under the sun.

However, none of those options have the same ring as a brutal four-day run. At least that's what Bellevue Club members Liz Strathy Merrill and her husband Nick Merrill figured when they decided to run the 200 miles between Portland and Seattle to raise money for a cause close to their hearts—clean water in sub-Saharan Africa.

With no support staff and only one change of clothes, Liz and Nick took the train down to Portland this past summer with the intention of running all the way home. They were armed with animal crackers, a jar of peanut butter, pretzels and Advil.

The idea for their event, “Running for Water,” was the result of two intersecting passions.

“We were watching the Ironman Hawaii on TV, and they profiled one of the participants who was running his race for clean water in Africa,” she says. “For whatever reason, it just kind of struck me.”

Liz began investigating the issue and came across “Drop in the Bucket,” a group dedicated to providing permanent sources of clean uncontaminated water to the most needy areas of Africa.

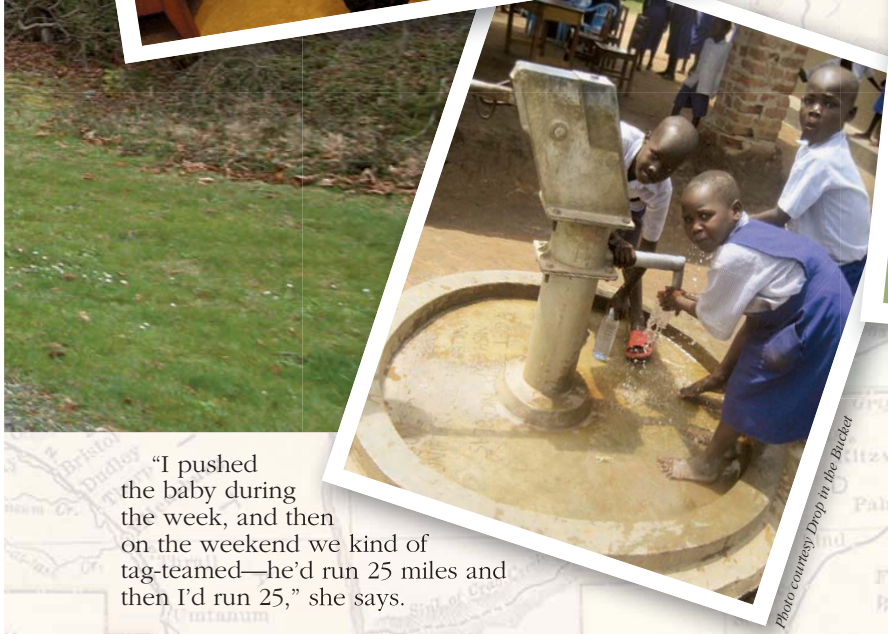
“I picked Drop in the Bucket because 100 percent of donated money goes to actually building wells,” she says. “The guy that runs it donates all of his time.”

At the same time, Liz and Nick were contemplating participation in the TransRockies Run, a grueling six-day, 125-mile-trail run through the Colorado Rockies, but decided against it due to their baby, Ben.

“I had just had a baby the year before. Logistically, it just didn't work out, and so we decided to make our own adventure,” Liz says.

Their adventure began by raising money for Drop in the Bucket, which created a special Web site for the event. Aiming high, Liz and Nick hoped to raise \$35,000, or enough to put water wells in 10 African schools. After hearing what they were doing, friends, family and coworkers pitched in and they earned the funds to build eight wells throughout Uganda and Mozambique.

Both competitive adventure racers and marathoners, Liz says they simply did their “usual” training routine: running eight miles several times per week and 25 miles every Saturday—a feat made even more impressive with both an infant and their two other children, Sarah, 13, and Caitlyn, 11, at home.



Five Reflections

Favorite Book:
 "The power of Positive Thinking"
 by Norman Peale.

Favorite Food:
 It's got to be ice cream. We have
 ice cream every single night.

Best Advice:
 Everybody needs to have an hour
 of fun per day.

perfect Day:
 It would be sunny, and I could run
 as far as I wanted without any time
 constraints. Then I'd have a big din-
 ner with all my family over.

Favorite Activity at the Club:
 It's got to be John's (McKinnon)
 class with all my girls. I just love
 that class.

"I pushed the baby during the week, and then on the weekend we kind of tag-teamed—he'd run 25 miles and then I'd run 25," she says.

Rural Ramblings

Bringing a mountain bike with a tow-along trailer stocked with food and water, Liz and Nick took turns running and riding the bike in five-mile increments along rural back roads. "We would cover about 50 miles per day," she says. "Once we started, we wouldn't stop until about six hours later." Staying the night in small towns, they would wash their clothes in hotel-room sinks every night. Although the run was a success, Liz says they had a few unforgettable moments along the way.

"For whatever reason, it just kind of struck me."

"We had just switched and I was running by myself, and I saw these two big un-chained Rot-tweilers on the side of the road. I slowed down and got really nervous, but right then, a big suburban came from behind and got between me and the dogs and drove really slow," she says. "They stayed with me for about half a mile until I was away from the dogs." Another exciting moment happened when they were within five miles of home.

"Probably the funniest thing happened when we got to Renton, which is our training run," she says. "We can just taste being home, and it was really congested because it was four in the afternoon. I was trying to dodge this lady at the bus stop on the bike and I took the curb too hard, and all of our stuff comes flying out and peanut butter is rolling down the street." Despite the mishap, team "Lick"—a spelling combination of Liz and Nick they use for adventure race entries—made it home safely to family and friends. Besides an assortment of regional marathons and events, they're currently setting their sights on the TransRockies Run for next year. But in the meantime, Liz is working with her daughters to host a slightly less grueling fundraiser. "We're trying to do a mother/daughter luncheon," she says.

Above l-r: Sarah, Nick, Ben, Liz and Caitlyn

