RUN HARD

by Betsey Guzior • photos by Danni Snaps

Running is not just good for the body, but for the soul.

For more than a decade, Jesse Harmon has been trying to spread that message through his nonprofit, aimed at elementary school students. "Running is a great life teacher," Harmon said.

Harmon oversees his Run Hard organization, which teaches elementary students the skills to run a 5K.

The former youth minister is passionate about the benefits of organized athletics. Run Hard aims to reach that goal by exposing youth to the sport of running, which can lead to a lifetime of fitness.

You'll be able to see some of that passion at the next fundraising road race for Run Hard, scheduled for Nov. 11 beginning at the Lexington County Blowfish Stadium on Park Road. Hundreds plan to run to fund scholarships for Run Hard in half marathon, 10K, and 5K races.

Harmon began his dream in 2010, delivering newspapers early in the morning while he learned the ins and outs of creating a nonprofit and zeroing in on its mission.

In 2012, then-assistant principal of Rocky Creek Elementary School Adam Diamond approached Harmon about fulfilling a need for a boy's running club, with more than 50 students interested. "I remember telling him, 'I would love to teach them about running, but I would also like to leverage that time to teach him more about life, giving them life concepts that will build a platform for success later in life.' And he said I love it. Let's do it."

Another group was formed at Meadow Glen Elementary School, and both programs served as a pilot to work out the kinks. Since then, the program has expanded to other Lexington County schools, along with other Run Hard training in schools throughout the state, as well as Augusta and Florida.

Just under 800 students in the Midlands now are enrolled in fee-based programs for the fall running season. Harmon serves as executive director with a staff that oversees the individual programs and their coaches.

In December, the kids will run a 5K with an adult running with them. In eight weeks of training, the students learn the

fundamentals of running, with sessions designed to build the stamina to navigate about the 3.1 miles of the race. The kids also learn the value of positive peer pressure, how teamwork operates on and off the track, and what it takes to be honorable and show respect.

"Those are the concepts that we thought were important to building a platform for success," he said.

The 2000 graduate of Lexington High School feels that running can change the direction of one's life. It certainly changed his. "I was an overweight, unathletic kid and bullied through middle school. Middle school was a tough season of life for me as it is for many kids," he said.

He challenged himself to train after barely running a mile for a Presidential Fitness test. "The next time the test came around the next semester, I thought, I'm going to run as long as I can and see what time I can get. And so, I was at White Knoll Middle School running around the dirt track, and I remember making it one lap and I realized, 'Hey, I ran a full lap without stopping. I'm pretty proud of myself.' And then I thought, 'Well, I'm going to see if I can make it to two, and I made it two.' And pushed on, 'All right, I'm halfway there.' I can vividly remember these thoughts."

That training helped Harmon to break eight minutes in a mile. It led to a lifetime of running, including his first marathon in March 2007 and the Boston Marathon in 2011.

Working as a youth pastor after graduating from Columbia International University also helped Harmon develop a passion for teaching life lessons. "I began to understand that running, though tough, teaches you a lot. And if I put work in, I have a little

RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD

RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD RUN HARD

bit of potential. So, let's find out what that potential is."

Harmon remembers so many successes, but the story of Crawford sticks with him. Crawford has been running with Run Hard since second grade. In 2020, a benign tumor on Crawford's spine returned, prompting a long time of surgery and rehabilitation. In 2022, Crawford ran his first 5K race after surgery. He came in last in his race in Augusta but was happy that he finished.

"I think a lot in life can be learned by doing difficult things," Harmon said. "And running is just a difficult thing to do. It's hard. It makes us work hard. It requires a lot of effort. But whenever we get finished, whenever you see those kids cross the finish line, you can see it on their faces and the expression, it doesn't matter if you finish first or last, you still cross that finish line and you get an elevated sense of self-respect or self-accomplishment because it's like 'I just did something that a lot of people didn't do this morning and that's something to be proud of.' So that's why we choose running."

Learn more at runhard.org and runhardhalf.org. ■