

[ROAR]



Anne Mahlum (third from the left) huddles pre-run with her Philadelphia running pals

# Stepping Out

One woman's passion for running creates positive change for the homeless

**W**ell before dawn on the still streets of Philadelphia, Anne Mahlum hits the pavement, her running shoes echoing down the block. For years the diminutive blond has risen at four thirty in the morning for a solo inner-city jog that serves as part training, part spiritual satisfaction, and part therapy.

"That primitive physical motion and all the metaphors that surround it," says Anne, "reaffirm to me that everything is going to be okay."

Though the 28-year-old marketing consultant had been running since she was 16 years old, she'd never stopped to consider the people she passed on her route. But, on one brisk morning in May 2007, as she jogged past her usual fan club of down-on-their-luck men cheering from beneath tattered blankets on the sidewalk, a sense of selfishness sunk in. "I literally stopped in my tracks and thought, *What the hell am I doing?*" recalls Anne. "Here I am, starting off my day in a way that is so amazing. Why don't I share that with them?"

Less than two months after her running epiphany, Anne contacted a skeptical director at Philadelphia's Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission. Nine pairs of running shoes in hand, she showed up at dawn on July 3, 2007, for

the first group run.

"I walked into a shelter filled with older African-American men. They looked at me like, *Who the hell are you?* They assumed I didn't have any problems," Anne recalls. In reality, she told them, her father was an alcoholic and a drug addict, and she'd had her own fair share of addiction problems related to food. She also told them that running had been her savior. And off they went, for a brutal, but—for some—life-changing 15-minute jog.

Nick Hughes, 28, had just finished a four-year prison sentence when he met "this strange little girl" named Anne: "I thought she was nuts." He passed on her offers at first, preferring to sleep "to escape the depression." But after other runners returned with a palpable high, he signed up. "You take a guy whose life has fallen apart before his eyes," he says, "He may not have anything else, but you know what, he's a runner now. He's an athlete. It gives him his self-esteem back." Hughes has since logged hundreds of miles, returned to school to study computer science, gotten a job, and moved into an apartment.

Fast-forward two years and Anne's running club for the homeless, Back on My Feet (BOMF), is flourishing with 80 members

from Philadelphia shelters running three mornings a week and a new group set to launch in Baltimore this month. The nonprofit now has four full-time staffers, 400 volunteers, and a \$1.2 million annual budget to help participants attend school, find jobs, and get off the street.

As 2008 came to a close, Anderson Cooper recognized Anne as one of the nation's ten CNN Heroes and granted BOMF \$25,000. Anne's early-morning revelation—to harness the runner's high to battle homelessness—has sparked a movement, and similar programs are in the works in cities across the country.

BOMF aside, Anne still takes those four thirty in the morning runs and spends much of her spare time training for her goal to complete a marathon on every continent by 2010 (only Australia and Antarctica remain). Twelve years after she took it up, her sport still feeds her soul. "I feel like I'm waking up the city with my footsteps," she says. "I like that responsibility."

-Lisa Marshall

(To volunteer or find Back on My Feet events in your area, visit [www.backonmyfeet.org](http://www.backonmyfeet.org))