

FOR CE DIRECTOR, RUNNING IS PERSONAL

This fall, PTS Director of Continuing Education Dr. Helen Blier will run her fourth half marathon, the Nike Women's Half Marathon in San Francisco, to raise money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society (LLS). We asked Helen what motivated her to get involved in this benefit event. Basically for Helen, it's personal.

"In October 1997," she explains, "my father was diagnosed with a type of blood cancer, likely caused by exposure to benzene and Agent Orange while in the military. He was told he wouldn't see the new millennium."

Helen continues: "Two and a half months later, my brother's three-year-old son, Noah, was diagnosed with ALL—a type of leukemia. So in just three months, my family was dealt a double whammy of blood cancer."



"Amazingly," she notes, "Noah is now 21 and a tall, strapping college student. And Dad is still with us, believed to be one of the longest-living survivors with his form of cancer. He only began chemotherapy last year." But Helen's decision to start running to benefit LLS didn't come until 2009. "The Pittsburgh Marathon was being run on my birthday, and I took my morning coffee out to Highland Avenue to watch the elite runners. Before long, I was going hoarse cheering folks on—especially those with the purple singlets that mark LLS runners. I remember one woman who was really flagging there at the 20-mile mark. I yelled, 'Go Team in Training! We love you!' She turned around, looked at me, and said, 'I'm doing this for my mother.' I stopped cold, got very emotional, and said, 'You're doing it for my father, too.' And then I asked myself, 'Why aren't I doing it for him and Noah?' So now I do." Since then, she has raised nearly \$10,000 for the cause.

Helen says that actually she "hates running"—at least the first couple of miles, till "the zen of it kicks in." She uses shorter runs as time to think and pray. "The process of training has been something of a spiritual journey for me. I don't use an iPod, so it's very contemplative. It requires the first rule of any spiritual practice: be *attentive*. I have to pay attention to the present moment alone. It's a discipline that has carried over into other areas of my life."

"It's also a way to practice the spiritual discipline of gratitude," she says. "I'm grateful for the ongoing presence of certain people in my life, represented by the names written in Sharpie all over my running shoes. The ones on the left are the folks who are living with cancer or who beat it—Dad, Noah, and my friend Mia; the ones on the right lost their fight—the fathers of three friends, one of whom is my son's namesake. There are others. When folks make a donation, I invite them to write on my shoe the name of the person in whose honor they donated. These heroes and their stories keep me going as the knees and hips ache."

In closing we asked Helen why she was running this particular half marathon for LLS. Her answer was simple: "Well, the finishers' medal is a sterling silver Tiffany necklace handed to you at the finish line by a San Francisco firefighter in a tuxedo. Need I say more?"

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