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Group trains runners for marathons, spreads pro-life message at events

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Life Runners Elena Kraus and Stephen Schmidt gather with other team members before the start of the St. Louis University 2012 Run for Their Lives 5K in early May in St. Louis. Proceeds from the race benefited the university's Pregnant and Parenting Student Assistance fund. (CNS/Sid Hastings)

WASHINGTON -- How far would you go to defend life? Life Runners would go about 26.2 miles a race.

Founded in South Dakota by running partners Pat Castle and Rich Reich, Life Runners has been promoting Catholicism and the pro-life movement through marathons in some of the nation's biggest cities since 2008.

Castle said Life Runners came out of a prayer group the two men co-founded in 2007 called Life Group Devotions. They decided to create an "action arm" of their ministry.

"We started with devotions from the beginning and then it dawned on us. We are training and running marathons, and we are looking for a pro-life 'action arm,'" Castle told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview from Sioux Falls, S.D. "There was none, I mean zero, organized pro-life teams represented in marathons. There are 5Ks all around but not at the major marathon level."

Life Runners' goal is to participate in at least one marathon a year. In 2008, it was the Chicago marathon; in 2009, St. Paul-Minneapolis; in 2010, Sioux Falls, S.D.; and 2011, Kansas City, Mo.

Castle said the group's five-member board chooses the location. They "look for fall marathons around the country and then decide where our mission is needed most," he said.

Life Runners, now based in St. Louis, is made up of people who pray, run and raise money for pregnancy help centers and build awareness about the abortion issue.

Once the location is decided, a pro-life beneficiary is picked, and the organization's local chapters spend the year fundraising for the designated pro-life entity.

"Every penny goes toward the beneficiaries," Castle noted.

The runners wear blue T-shirts with the scriptural quote "REMEMBER The Unborn Jer 1:5" across the back.

"We are certainly pro-life missionaries," Castle said. "We are wearing a jersey like a little mini-billboard, and we are running through the streets of cities in secular races. We are bringing the pro-life message into the world. We don't have to speak a word. We are representing Christ with that message on our back."

Lisa Skowron, 44, a pro-life Methodist from San Antonio, joined Life Runners because of the support its members gave her. She said she had an abortion that left her searching for healing for 24 years.

"I went through post-abortive healing in 2008. Then I started running to connect with God again. I ran my first half marathon in 2008 and first full marathon in 2009. I dedicated it to the child I had aborted," Skowron told CNS.

"At the race, standing there and looking around and seeing the other groups (running for a cause), I thought, 'Why isn't there anything for pro-life?' That (run) was a personal dedication. I thought it would be so wonderful to see an organization that was for pro-life," she added.

Skowron took some time away from running, then came across Life Runners by reading a LifeSiteNews article. She sent an email to Life Runners, sharing her story and asking about its mission.

"I had prayed one day that God would inspire me to run again. Life Runners, it's just so God," Skowron said.

Around 500 people from across the U.S. currently belong to Life Runners. The organization's most recent event was a marathon in St. Louis April 15, though the group often has more than just one race per year because local chapters can organize and participate in local races.

"We have just taken off," Castle said. "We have a strategic goal of growing. In 2011, we raised $35,000 before really having an organized fundraising process. It would not surprise me if we raised close to $100,000 this year."

Life Runners' next race is the St. Louis Rock 'n' Roll Marathon Oct. 21. The event has one-mile, 5K, half and full marathon options. Castle estimates about 400 people will participate with Life Runners.

When a person signs up with Life Runners, he or she is told about the organization's local chapters.

According to Castle, chapter members pray together and train together. Most chapters also have a chaplain.

"If someone registering does not have a chapter close to them, I encourage them to start one. All they need is five runners," Castle said.

Skowron, who has four children, started a chapter in San Antonio. "We have about 10 members now. We've done two runs together as a team so far."

Teresa Laugeman, 43, is a chapter leader in St. Charles, Mo. She has been part of Life Runners for about nine months.

"I have noticed whenever I run with a group of Life Runners, it's always a better run," she said. "We always say the Life Runners creed before we run and there is so much support from the people you are running with.

"We are all there for the same cause; we are running for the babies. You don't feel like you're competing, you're all going toward one common goal. It's a good feeling."

For those running a half marathon, training begins about three months before the race; for a full, about four to five months prior.

Planning for Life Runners' next big project is under way -- a cross-country race during 40 Days for Life, a national campaign to end abortion. The run starts Feb 13, 2013.

Headed by Life Runner Jeff Grabosky, the race was inspired by his own run across America January to May 2011.

The Life Runners website is http://liferunners.org. Following the organization on Facebook also grants access to information on upcoming marathons, daily prayers and devotions.

"Our motto is 'All In Christ For Pro-Life,'" Castle said. "You become the essence of what you are talking about. We have to have the courage to talk about it. We need to plant the seed. We have to make people say, 'Hey, did you see what's going on? I want to be part of that.'"

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