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MARATHONS

How the LA Marathon teaches at-risk teens to push through life's challenges

GRIFFITH PARK >> Jenny Martinez was a 230-pound high school junior verging on diabetes who went to violent parties with rides home from drunk drivers.

Then she found a San Fernando Valley-based program called Students Run L.A.

She quit drinking. Dropped 100 pounds. Boosted her grades from F's to A's. And last year finished her first Los Angeles Marathon.

"I was overwhelmed with emotion because I couldn't believe that I made it this far," said Martinez, 17, of Highland Park, now a senior at Academia Avance Charter school. "I felt invincible. I kept telling myself that if I could finish a marathon, then there was nothing that I couldn't do."



Daniel Limo, center, of Kenya, 2015 Skechers Performance Los Angeles Marathon Champion, leads the run with Students Run LA's teens and coaches as well as elite marathon runners from Kenya during a short training run at Griffith Park in Los Angeles on Friday, March 17, 2017. (Photo by Ed Crisostomo, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

Martinez was among nearly two dozen at-risk teens to team up Friday morning with elite Kenyan runners of the L.A. Marathon for a trot through Griffith Park before this weekend's 26.2-mile epic footrace.

They will join the 3,500 teens from [Students Run L.A.](#) on Sunday to run the grueling marathon from Dodger Stadium to Santa Monica.

The Tarzana-based after school training program, now celebrating its 28th year, has taught success to 63,000 at-risk kids.

As middle and high school teens learn what it takes to finish one epic foot race, organizers say, they also discover hard work and grit will get them across any finish line in life.

On Sunday, SRLA kids from 175 schools across the region will join in the exultant throng.

Of the students who start the marathon, 98 percent cross the finish line, according to the agency. And more than 95 percent of seniors like Martinez graduate from high school — compared with 60 percent of students in Los Angeles County.



Daniel Limo, second from the left, of Kenya, 2015 Skechers Performance Los Angeles Marathon Champion, leads the run with Students Run LA's teens and coaches as well as elite marathon runners from Kenya during a short training run at Griffith Park in Los Angeles on Friday, March 17, 2017.

"I'm ready. Super ready. Super energized," said Martinez, who hopes to become a veterinarian. "This has changed my life."

The group's roots date back to 1986, when East Los Angeles continuation high school teacher Harry Shabazian finished the first L.A. Marathon — and was transformed.

He then challenged his troubled students to train for the arduous event — and change their lives as well. The once-misfit teens not only completed the marathon the following year.

They went on to finish high school and college.

Based on his success, the Los Angeles Unified School District in 1989 established Students Run L.A., which soon became its own nonprofit. The \$2 million Tarzana agency now includes 500 volunteer teacher leaders, and hands out thousands of dollars in college scholarships.

Eric Spears was a continuation teacher at what is now John R. Wooden High School in Reseda when he helped found SRLA, one of the nation's largest youth running programs. All teens are at-risk, he said, because all teens are on the cusp of disaster.

"Running provides stability. A life course," said Spears, its senior coordinator, now retired and poised to run his 29th L.A. Marathon. "Bottom line: what this really does for kids is self-empowerment."

As the sun broke over Los Angeles Friday, 20 SRLA students and the Kenyan runners dashed 2.4 miles along Griffith Park's Wilson Golf Course. Many requested autographs from the light-footed Kenyans.

"This is so great. This is one of my favorite parts of marathon weekend," said Tracy Russell, who serves on the SRLA board and is CEO of Conquer Endurance Group, which runs the 2017 Skechers Performance Los Angeles Marathon. "This program that we have here in Los Angeles is so incredible, for the youth and up-and-coming runners ... for our community to support younger people to become active, healthy and fit."

Among the students poised to run on Sunday were six John R. Wooden High School students, who prepared last month with an 18-mile run at Hansen Dam.

Three, including 16-year-old Chaydy Vega of Reseda, had never run a marathon.

"I'm pretty scared," Vega said. "But I need to stay calm. Running has changed my life. Since I lost my mom seven months ago, it's helped distract me. This is dedicated to her, Cristina."

Fina Tavake, 17, of Winnetka, was involved with Students Run L.A. for nearly three years, but Sunday will be her first marathon race.

"It's nerve-wracking," said Tavake, who will soon attend Norwich University in Vermont on a rugby scholarship. "(But) it's a big deal.

"It's like life: you've got a commitment; even though you have your ups and downs, you push through."

Editor's Note: This story has been updated to correct the first name of SRLA co-founder Eric Spears.