

Running commentary

By Charlie Kanzig
Correspondent

On his early morning drive to work at Sisters Athletic Club recently, club owner Tate Metcalf heard a story by the BBC on NPR about a documentary called “Skid Row Marathon.” The film chronicles the unique response one judge in Los Angeles had to the homeless population in his city: starting a running club for residents of the Midnight Mission Homeless Shelter.

Metcalf was so touched by the story, he immediately contacted the producer to find out if he could arrange for a showing at Sisters Movie House.

“I dang near had to pull off the road, I was so moved by the story,” he said. “I knew I wanted to share the film with members of the club and the community because I thought people could relate to the running aspect of the story, but it was the bigger motivating factor was the idea of outreach to help the homeless.”

As soon as he got to work he watched the film’s trailer and immediately got in contact with the producer about bringing the film to Sisters.

The producer responded with a price for one showing, but Metcalf wanted to offer the film to be seen by youth who were in town for the Great Northwest Running Camp, operated by Sisters Parks & Recreation District and directed by local runner and coach Josh Nordell. Metcalf and the producer struck a deal resulting in a showing at Sisters Movie House on Wednesday, June 27, as well as at the camp.

Metcalf estimated just under 100 people watched the screening at the movie house, along with about the same number at the running camp.

The full title of the film

is “Skid Row Marathon: Dignity One Step at a Time,” which better describes Judge Craig Mitchell’s purpose in starting the running club.

He describes in the film how as a criminal court judge he spends the day sentencing people to jail terms based on crimes they have committed and wanted to do more to give hope to people who had lost their way. As a long-time runner Mitchell decided, in 2012, to try involving residents of a local shelter in running as a way to get healthier. Soon, members of the shelter are not only joining him for early morning runs, but making plans to actually run marathons.

I have written in this column before my belief that doing distance running together has a way of fostering friendships, which is a big part of what comes through in the film. The fact that his judge has been able develop genuine relationships with people who have lived for years under the grip of addiction, spent time in jail, and endured the

harshness of homelessness is a testimony to both him and the power of putting in miles together. Running in a group gives time to talk, to encourage, to have accountability.

The body and mind respond and adapt to distance running in a fascinating way, which is clearly proven within the documentary.

What started as a couple of guys joining Judge Mitchell now and then for morning jogs turned into a much more expansive group. Mitchell decided they needed bigger goals and challenged members to train for an actual marathon. In its history, Mitchell’s club members have run in Los Angeles, Ghana and Rome. Mitchell believed that traveling to other countries would help his runners get a larger perspective of the world.

Metcalf said, “After seeing this film, you can’t help but ask yourself ‘What more can I do to help others?’”

Sue and Jim Beck attended, and both thought the documentary was well done and inspiring. Said Sue,

“I was impressed with the judge, who gave so much of himself and helped change these lives when he didn’t have to. The runners themselves were equally inspiring in how they somehow found a way to continue sobriety and turn their lives in a totally new direction.”

“The film did an excellent job of humanizing the homeless,” said Jim.

The Becks also gave kudos to Metcalf for bringing the film to Sisters.

“I am so glad Tate brought the film to Sisters,” said Sue. “He is such a positive addition to this town.”

A representative from the Bethlehem Inn in Bend spoke before the start of the film and shared information about both it and Sisters’ own Cold Weather Shelter. While there is no skid row in Central Oregon, we certainly have a homeless population, mostly in the forests. The issue is complex, but as individuals

and as a society we need to ask ourselves, “What can we do to restore dignity, allow opportunity for recovery, and make opportunities for relationship?”

“...maybe I needed this film for my own good — to be reminded there is good in the world and that we need to open up our hearts to all people.

— Tate Metcalf

Metcalf said, “The current climate in our country has been pretty negative, so maybe I needed this film for my own good — to be reminded there is good in the world and that we need to open up our hearts to all people.”

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