

Beyond Competition, Running for a Greater Cause

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Joshua Bright for The New York Times

Runners for Shoe4Africa gathered for a two-mile run with the group's founder, Toby Tanser, in New York.

THEY missed the exhilaration of the start on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. The sidewalks along First Avenue, where they are usually welcomed like heroes, were empty. No one got a finisher's medal.

Yet, on what was referred to jokingly by some as "Non-Marathon Sunday," many runners who had been expecting to participate in the 2012 [New York City Marathon](#), canceled because of [Hurricane Sandy](#), managed to honor their commitment — to charity.

At 9:15 a.m., 28 runners wearing white T-shirts with colorful logos set out in a group from the front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue and ran into Central Park.

They were among 52 marathoners who had raised an average of \$3,000 each for Shoe4Africa, an organization that began in 1995 as an informal effort to send running shoes to Kenyan athletes who couldn't afford proper footwear. In the years since, it has grown into

a charity now raising money to build a public children's hospital in the city of Eldoret, Kenya.

"People involved in running are giving people, helping people," said the organization's founder, Toby Tanser of Manhattan, who led the group Sunday. "I wanted to base my charity around those people."

At about the same time, on the opposite side of the park, Rebecca Hanson and a group of her friends started on a run from Columbus Circle. Four days earlier, she and a friend, Mwangi Gitahi, both of whom live in Manhattan, formed a Facebook group to raise money for hurricane relief.

On Sunday, Hanson, who had been registered for the official marathon, ran her own 26.2-mile race in the park for her charity. Thank to contributions from 65 donors, she and Gitahi ended up surpassing their goal of \$2,620.

On hurricane-ravaged Long Island, John Feyrer pinned his official New York City Marathon race number on his shirt, posed for a photo with his family and took off on his own marathon: 26.2 miles through the streets and neighborhoods of Garden City.

The goals of these runners involved money as much as mileage. They were not alone. According to Running USA, an organization based in Santa Barbara, Calif., that tracks running trends, about 20 percent of the participants in most large marathons are running to raise money for some charitable organization. The beneficiaries include large national nonprofits, local animal shelters and nature preserves.

Last year, according to the New York Road Runners, organizers of the New York City Marathon, more than \$34 million was raised for charity. Moreover, fund-raising experts expect that the vast majority of runners in this year's race will still honor their commitments.

"I'm sure they're disappointed, and there might be some who are annoyed," said Michael Nilsen, spokesman for the Association of Fundraising Professionals in Arlington, Va. "But based on what we've seen in other situations where a charity event has been canceled because of weather or some other once-in-a-lifetime type circumstance, people generally don't take it out on the charity."

Mr. Nilsen said he would not be surprised to see "two-thirds, maybe more" of the charity marathoners meet their commitment to deliver the money they raised.

Like the New York City Marathon, other major United States marathons — Chicago, Boston, Marine Corps (in Washington) and the Rock 'n' Roll Marathon series held in various cities — have charitable programs they support and thousands of fund-raising runners among their participants. The most giving of major marathons, however, is London, in which 74 percent of the 36,705 finishers in the event last April raised money for charity: £52.8 million (an amount equivalent to about \$85 million).

Clearly, an idea that was novel two decades ago, that distance runners might want to use their highly individualistic sport to help others, "has worked beyond anyone's imagination," said Running USA's spokesman, Ryan Lamma, noting that according to data compiled by both his organization and USA Track & Field, the total estimated amount raised in American road

aces in the last decade has more than doubled, from \$520 million in 2002 to more than \$1.2 billion in 2011.

While that is a significant figure, “the real impact is raising awareness and building community,” said Andrew Watt, president of the fund-raising professionals association. “There is an extraordinary sense of coming together for the common good in these events, and that is quite unique.”

Whether it is through large national programs like the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society’s Team in Training — largely credited as a pioneer in this area — or smaller groups like Shoe4Africa, organizations that use marathons (or the popular 13.1-mile half marathons) as a fund-raising platform have succeeded in other ways too. “They’ve gotten a lot of people to do something they would not have thought they could do,” Lamppa said.

Typically, charities are allocated a certain amount of entries from the race that they must pay for. The organization may then cover the runners’ entry fees and in some cases, provide training, coaching and even travel expenses in return for their fund-raising efforts. Another, increasingly popular option is what runners Hanson and Gitahi did: They organized their own fund-raiser through the online application CrowdRise and then promoted their cause through social media.

Social media has been a major tool for spreading the word, raising the funds and getting people across the finish line. “When you say to everyone on Facebook or Twitter, ‘I’m doing this for charity,’ there’s some stickiness there,” said David Hessekiel, president of the Cause Marketing Forum. “If you tell everyone you’re going to do it, you better do it.”

Hurricane or no hurricane.

“I felt like I had told people I was going to run a marathon, so I’m going to run a marathon,” said Feyrer, who had raised \$3,700, mostly in donations from friends and family, for Fred’s Team, the charity associated with Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and named in honor of Fred Lebow, founder of the New York City Marathon, who died of brain cancer in 1994.

Feyrer runs to raise money for a cancer hospital in part because of a brother-in-law who has melanoma. This was his second marathon for Fred’s Team, but the first in which people sitting on gas lines and in bagel shops came out to applaud him.

“It was cool,” said Feyrer, who was accompanied at various points during his personal fund-raising marathon by his wife, Diane, several running buddies and a group from the Garden City High School cross-country team that included his 16-year-old son, Timothy.

There were other benefits to running solo in the suburbs, as opposed to being part of a pack of 47,000 in the streets of the city. “I actually got down on the grass and did some stretches a few times,” Feyrer said after completing his GPS-measured course in about 4 hours, 13 minutes. “Because I did that, I feel a lot better now than I did after last year’s marathon.”

For Hanson, Sunday was her first venture into the world of charity running. “I have tons of running friends who have done fund-raisers,” said Hanson, 32, who lives in Manhattan. “I

know this makes me sound like a bad person, but I just never felt passionate enough about a cause to want to raise money. But this was really important to me.”

While running four grueling loops of hilly Central Park on Sunday, she said, she thought of all the friends who had responded with money in such a short time. “I felt very touched by the support,” she said. “I most definitely wanted to do it for them.”

Tanser said despite the hurricane, 51 out of his 52 runners arrived in New York last week to race. Once the event was canceled on Friday, many of the out-of-towners left. Fewer than five reneged on their fund-raising commitment. Tanser said he wasn’t surprised. “I’ve seen this with runners for years,” he said. “They step up time and time again.”