

One House at a Time: One Life at a Time

by Lonny Townley

Susan Jaye-Kaplan is a 5 foot tall, 98 pound, 54-year old medical insurance consultant from Longmeadow, Mass. She became a runner in the typical way. Inspired by her daughter to add athletics to her academic lifestyle, Susan started early morning run-walking, adding one house at a time along her street, until those houses eventually stretched to 15 miles in distance. Yet, it's at that 15-mile mark in her running career where her story takes a dramatic turn. Having found that running, as she says, "reduced my stress and enlarged my community of friends and acquaintances," she became a leader of the women's running movement in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts and northern Connecticut.

Four years ago, Jaye-Kaplan founded the Pioneer Valley Women's Running Club. This not-for-profit organization promotes physical activity through running and other activities for women who reside throughout the region that bears the club name. As the organization has matured, monthly club meetings, group runs, social events and a monthly newsletter have been supplemented with high profile, community-based events and programs. For example, several special 'evenings' with Rebecca Lobo and Kathrine Switzer have played to sold-out crowds at the National Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield. The club also has been a major supporter of "Shoes 4 Africa," a running apparel redistribution program that facilitates delivery of usable running gear to children throughout the African continent.

But it's one initiative in particular—the innovative 'walk to run' program—that has exploded in popularity. 'Walk to Run' is a simple program that yields powerful results. Over the last few years, the PVWRC has engaged dozens of formerly sedentary women to learn how to progress from walking to a running lifestyle. As with many great ideas, however, the popularity of the program, and its utility across a wider cross section of the sedentary population, meant that 'walk to run' needed to find a new home beyond the scope of the PVWRC. That's when Go Fit Inc. took root.

Hardly a day passes without a report in the media discussing the growing U.S. obe-

sity epidemic. Mountains of data support accumulating evidence that the problem is most acute among the underprivileged and economically depressed people, and especially among youth and women. In response, Jaye-Kaplan, and business partner Stephan A. Black, owner of Rocky Mountain Human Performance Center in West Springfield, Mass., created Go Fit Inc. This new not-for-profit organization is designed, says Jaye-Kaplan, to "empower, educate and motivate inner city youth to set their lives on a more healthful track by promoting education, exercise and supporting healthy decision making."

Since Go Fit went live last January, its two founders have been overwhelmed with inquiries from dozens of community-based, human service organizations about the initiation of 'walk to run' programs for their constituents. Jaye-Kaplan observes that "inner city youth get negativity 24/7. They need positive messages, that they can just do it." And that's what, she believes, underlies the booming popu-

larity of Go Fit's 'walk to run' program. Buoyed by the expressions of interest from so many corners of the community, Go Fit has engaged an impressive corps of volunteer staffers. Experts

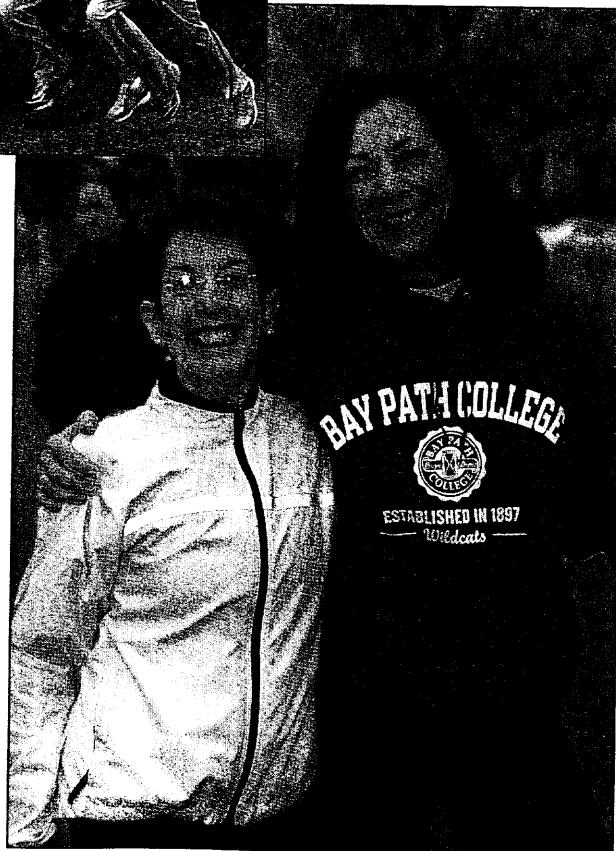
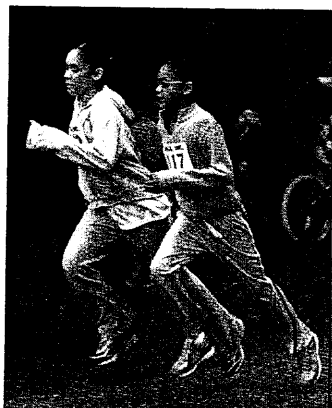
from the athletic, nutritional, medical and public safety disciplines have come together to design a comprehensive four to six week motivational and educational program that gets kids moving in a positive direction.

Community support for Go Fit has been "outstanding" says Jaye-Kaplan. Corporate partners such as Big Y Foods, American Saw/Lenox Tool, Bay State Health System, Bay Path College and, most recently and notably, Reebok, have provided the seed funding and a range of services and products necessary to get Go Fit going. Organizations that engage Go Fit typically secure grants in the range of \$6,000 that will fully support a program for up to 25 participants, including the provision of new active gear (shoes, socks, t-shirts, water bottles), journals, transportation and other necessary services. These features, reports Jaye-Kaplan, make the youthful program participants "feel that they're something special, and proud to say "I'm happy to be me."

Go Fit employs one paid staff member who coordinates all requests for programming. And in just four months time, the organization has fielded 68 requests for programs, a level of interest that would overwhelm even the most dedicated volunteers. The Board of Directors already includes an impressive roster of regional officials including Carol Leary, President of Bay Path College, and honorary board member Kathrine Switzer.

It would seem, given the meteoric rise that

Go Fit has experienced over the last few months, that the program seems destined for national stardom. Not so fast, says Jaye-Kaplan, "We are proud and happy for our grassroots program, and are content to do the best we can do for where we are today." While media personalities of national prominence have expressed interest in helping to bring Go Fit to the national stage, Jaye-Kaplan notes, "It's best not to go too fast." That counsel might sound strange coming from such a high achiever who has built this thriving enterprise in a matter of months, not years. But, just as she learned to run four years ago, stretching her distance one house at a time, Jaye-Kaplan has found deep satisfaction in providing a service that positively motivates youth (even if it's one youngster's life at a time) to appreciate and self-engage in physical activity. Perhaps one young Go Fit participant summed up her experience with Go Fit best: "I have wings on my feet and I think I can run faster than everyone." Somehow you know that Jaye-Kaplan is smiling at that one. **NR**



(Above) Empowerment is one of many benefits inner city youth experience through Go Fit's program.

(Below) Susan Jaye-Kaplan and Kathrine Switzer.