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HOW RUNNING IS HELPING THE HOMELESS GET BACK ON THEIR FEET

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Perth-based not-for-profit On My Feet is harnessing the power of running to help those in need get back into the workforce with more confidence.

Written by Lucy E Cousins



For Kath Mc Quaide, exercise physiologist, competitive runner and CEO of not-for-profit [On My Feet](#), running is “pure and inclusive”. It’s accessible to everyone, she explains, all you need is a pair of shoes.

“When you’re running, you have no idea where the person you’re running next to comes from. It’s such an equal playing field on so many levels. Running doesn’t discriminate whether you have a great education or you’re very wealthy,” she says.

It’s this way of thinking that attracted Kath (a South African by birth) to Perth-based charity, On My Feet and the work they do with the Perth and Melbourne homeless community. And running is pivotal to its success.

“On My Feet provides an environment for vulnerable Australians who are either homeless or near homeless to come and train in a community setting,” she explains. “Through running together, we can provide a safe space for them where they can improve their mental wellness, their self-worth, self-esteem, and gain some purpose.”



Combating homelessness with running

A volunteer-run not-for-profit, On My Feet was founded by Perth-local and ultra-runner Keegan Cragie in 2014 but now operates in both Perth and Melbourne. Through the framework of a six-month program, run by over 30 volunteers, On My Feet provides exercise, education, and support to those in need with the aim of ending homelessness.

“Through their training, we offer a new community [to our participants] where someone asks about them, cares about them and listens to them,” Kath explains. “That is so important because a lot of them feel, especially if they’ve got a criminal record or they’ve made poor decisions, that they’ve become ‘less’ in the eyes of society and don’t feel heard.”

Many of the members who are helped by On My Feet start by simply being a part of the training events, which include group runs and a coffee and a chat afterwards. It’s the free coffee afterwards that encourages the social vibe which members seem to gravitate towards, she says.

One important aspect of these sessions is that volunteers and participants wear the same outfits so there is no differentiation between them. Kath believes this helps the focus be on running and self-empowerment.

“There’s On My Feet training top, shorts, caps, and so we’re all wearing the same kit together and we just run. It’s such a lovely philosophy that Keegan introduced, this idea of community building through running,” she says. “Suddenly members now have a family, and many do describe us as their family.”

The power of Footsteps

When members feel comfortable and confident with On My Feet they tend to become more committed in their attendance, says Kath. They show that they want to change their lives around, and they want to get back to a place of self-sufficiency.

The most committed of these members are offered a place on a more extensive program, called Footsteps, that aims to help them become job-ready and “on their feet”.

“When they’re on the Footsteps program, members are taken through a kind of pre-employment course, which includes personal management techniques, technical skills, professionalism, financial management, and they are prepped for going back into the workplace,” she explains.

Alongside of the Footsteps program, members are also encouraged to continue to attend their regular training sessions. The idea is to work on improving their confidence while learning new running skills, building them up week after week with the help of running coaches.

For those unable to run, especially older members of the community, there are walking sessions, which still include the crucial coffee and a chat afterwards.



The Sydney Marathon experience

As a further form of encouragement and also goal setting opportunity, a select group of members on the Footsteps program are also invited to participate in events such as the Sydney Marathon. This includes not only being a part of a team in one of Australia’s best running events (we know, we’re biased), but also the flight and hotel accommodation as well.

However, Kath stresses, the experience is less about the excitement of travel and more about the sense achievement that competing in an event as prestigious as the Sydney Marathon can bring for those who participate in it.

“When they cross the line, they feel like they’ve won a gold medal, you know, and they really can see where they’ve come from,” explains Kath.

It’s these “full circle” moments that motivate Kath and her team to coach with an empathetic point of view, with the notion that everyone has come to On My Feet with their own experiences and setbacks.

For example, those who are training for the Sydney Marathon are now on a strict training program to run a half marathon on 21 May, and according to Kath, they know exactly what they should be doing in each session. But if they aren’t quite feeling up to it in any given week, or if they need some extra support, On My Feet is there for them.

“There are occasions where they might feel like they can’t run, or they’ve lost their confidence; that’s when we suggest taking a few steps back so that they feel more comfortable in what they’re doing,” explains Kath. “Often our members don’t come to us with a lot of self-esteem, and they sometimes doubt themselves, so there’s never pressure from us. It’s very much about being a safe and comfortable space for them.”

For Kath, though, a measure of success is not a member just finishing a race or gaining some new skills, it’s helping those in need integrate back into society job-ready and confident in their future.

“They might even come full circle and want to be part of mentoring someone who’s new in the program,” says Kath. “Someone they can inspire and who they can share their achievements with during their time with On My Feet and encourage them to do the same.”

For more about On My Feet, check out their [website](#) or [contact them](#) directly. If you’d like to support what they do, consider buying a pair of their fantastic [On My Feet Socks](#), which helps raise money to run their programs.

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