



# BACK ON THEIR FEET

*This Chicago group uses running as a way to improve the lives of people experiencing homelessness.*

 Kendall Wenaas  Cole Norum



**MARK LARSON**, 62, joined Back on My Feet in November 2013. Since joining the organization, he's run one half-marathon and a variety of shorter races.

It's a chilly Monday morning on the Chicago riverfront. The sun has yet to rise, and there's a steady stream of cars, but Lakeshore Drive isn't too busy yet. Some Chicagoans are already on their way to work, while others are heading to the gym. But on the corner of Wilson and Marine Drive, a small group of people is forming.

The crowd is fewer than 10 people, and amidst a bustling city, the group stands still. They're friendly—greeting each other with a warm hug and "Hello!" whenever someone approaches.

It's 5:50 a.m. now, and it looks like no one else is coming, so the group circles up and starts to stretch, counting out loud. Terri Rivera is directing the group today and announces they're running north. She asks if they can make the switch from minutes to miles now that it's getting warmer out. A few people nod and murmur yes, so she reminds the group where the 2- and 3-mile markers are.

They start to move. Some jog at a laidback pace, slowly warming up, while others sore from last week—begin walking. Mark Larson, 62, though, is feeling good. He's leading the group today.

Larson isn't a sprinter, but he keeps a steady pace. About a half mile into the run, Rivera catches up to him. He's able to talk while he runs, making him a great running partner. This is Rivera's first run in a while—she hurt her foot a couple weeks back—so Larson slows down to match her pace. These mornings, no one runs alone.

Rivera and Larson are part of Back on My Feet, a national, for-purpose organization that uses running to build dedication, independence, and stability in the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

It's an unusual concept—that physical fitness could help someone get a job. But it's not the exercise that's changing people's lives. Rather, it's the life skills that come along with it. The organization, which was founded in 2007 in Philadelphia, now has 11 chapters nationwide, one of them being the Chicago branch.

They're nearing the tennis courts—the turnaround point for 2-milers. Larson was planning on running 3 miles today, but Rivera is only doing 2. He chooses good conversation over mileage and turns around with her.

"When you start running, you feel amazing. You're doing things you didn't think you could," says Rivera, executive director for Back on My Feet Chicago. "And to translate that over to people who not only have never run, but maybe hadn't had a huge accomplishment before, really makes sense."

By joining Back on My Feet, members are taking control of their lives. After losing his job during the recession in 2009, Larson was on the streets for a few years. He heard about Back on My Feet from his caseworker and decided to give it a shot two years ago. He wanted a steady exercise routine and to participate in some races. But he didn't expect to benefit so much.

**“ WHEN YOU START RUNNING, YOU FEEL AMAZING. YOU'RE DOING THINGS YOU DIDN'T THINK YOU COULD.”**

— **TERRI RIVERA**,  
BACK ON MY FEET  
CHICAGO DIRECTOR

To get started with the program, a person must attend all three runs in a week. After that, they're given a set of workout clothes. If they come the following week, they're given a pair of running shoes, courtesy of national partner, Mizuno. If a member maintains 90 percent attendance for a month—that's only missing one run—they move on to the "Next Steps" program.

"Our members choose to be there," Rivera says. "They're very motivated, and to get to 90 percent attendance, it's not that hard—well, it's hard in February—but they want to be a part of Back on My Feet. It's great to be around people who are excited and want to make change."

Six months after joining, Larson ran his first half marathon. He'd lost touch with his family a few years prior, but the race spurred him to call and tell his siblings about his achievement.

"I got back in touch with my family thanks to Back on My Feet," Larson says. He's now training for his second half marathon, which is coming up in May, and is hoping to cut 15 minutes off his time.

The Chicago program is divided into three running teams, depending on proximity to different homeless facilities in the area. All three—as well as every

BACK ON MY FEET CHICAGO RUNS

**90** → **275** → **14,300**  
MILES A DAY    MILES AVG. PER WEEK    MILES PER YEAR

On average, three teams of 10 will run three times a week.

**43,954** | **341** RUNNERS | SINCE THE LAUNCH IN **SEPT. 2010**  
TOTAL MILES RUN SINCE THE GROUP WAS FORMED

**139** MEMBERS | HAVE FOUND/ GAINED EMPLOYMENT SINCE **SEPT. 2010** | **93** MEMBERS | HAVE OBTAINED HOUSING SINCE **SEPT. 2010**



**LARSON IS TRAINING** for a second half-marathon in May, so he goes on longer runs on Saturdays. Some weekday mornings, he runs over a mile before meeting up with the group.

STARTING AT THE INTERSECTION of Wilson and Marine, the group runs under Lakeshore Drive and turns onto their route, which overlooks Lake Michigan.



team across the country—meet to run before the sun comes up on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Employees and volunteers must be just as committed. They run with the group each morning and are responsible for keeping track of attendance and traveled miles. The Chicago branch was founded in September 2010, and since then, it's helped 341 members. Nationally, Back on My Feet has served 4,763 people.

Both Rivera and Meredith Weber, senior development and marketing director, run weekly with a Chicago team. This reminds them why they do what they do, and strengthens their relationships with runners.

"When you're running, you're side-by-side—you're not looking each other in the face," Rivera says. "What comes out just starts to spew, so you get to hear people's stories and really get to know someone for who they are. There are few times in life where we really get to do that in a natural setting."

The mandatory attendance requires discipline and responsibility. The early

start time instills time management. And as far as the importance of goal setting is concerned, running is the perfect example.

On top of running a half-marathon and reuniting with his family since joining the organization, Larson has also secured himself a job with one of Back on My Feet's national partners, Marriott.

When it comes to finding a job, those experiencing homelessness often face more hurdles than those in steady housing. Back on My Feet acts as both a mentor and advocate for its members. Accenture, another partner, helps with both funding and programming. Their program, Tools for Success, is a collection of job-training classes on topics

—TERRI RIVERA,  
BACK ON MY FEET  
CHICAGO DIRECTOR

such as organization and interviewing.

"Right after the interviewing class, Back on My Feet helped me get an interview with the Renaissance Hotel, and it really

helped," Larson says. "During the mock interview with Accenture, they asked me a lot of the same questions that I was asked during the real interviews. So I was prepared. I don't think I would have gotten the job without the interview class."

A lack of a resume isn't the only roadblock when it comes to employment—there are sometimes financial barriers in the way as well. Back on My Feet aims to eliminate as many as possible. Members of the "Next Steps" program can apply for monetary aid. The cost must be a one-time fee—such as work boots, a bus card for the first month on the job, or an outstanding parking ticket—and a committee reviews the application.

At the end of the workout, the group huddles up, and with their arms around each other, recites the serenity prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

The courage to change the things I can, And the wisdom to know the difference."

They're not alone though. Runners around the country recite this prayer every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning with their Back on My Feet community.

"It's a fellowship," Larson says. "Men and women, all types of people, in different walks of life. You might be running with a volunteer who's a multi-millionaire—you don't know. Everybody is treated the same, gets along, and has fun." *dm*

## Step-by-Step

**COMMIT:** To become a member of Back on My Feet, a person must live at one of the organization's partnering homeless facilities for 30 days. They then sign a dedication contract, goals sheet, and evaluation survey.

**RUN:** Teams are made up of people experiencing homelessness and volunteers. In exchange for fundraising for local races, Back on My Feet pays for its members to run.

**LEARN:** Once a member has maintained 90 percent attendance, Back on My Feet provides job training and coordinates interviews.

**GRADUATE:** Once members secure employment and housing, they're considered alumni members, but many continue to run with their team.

Source: [backonmyfeet.org](http://backonmyfeet.org)



THE CHICAGO OFFICE collects new running shoes and clothes to give to its members.