

Not a sprint, but a marathon



Howie, a British expat working in Belgrade, was diagnosed with stage III bowel cancer in January of 2014.

Photo: Courtesy of Neil Howie

Neil Howie beat cancer and is now helping others through running.

Carolyn PALETTA

Im not sure why you're here," are the first words out of Neil Howie's mouth as he sits down for an interview. Even after six months of chemo, four full marathons, twelve half-marathons and thousands of dinars raised to benefit cancer institutions, Howie is too modest to believe his story is worth being told.

Howie, a British expat working as deputy principal for the British International School in Belgrade, was diagnosed with stage III bowel cancer in January of 2014. As a 45-year-old father of four, the diagnosis came as an abrupt shock.

"Within five minutes of the tests you are told you have a large tumor," Howie wrote in a blog post. "Then you are really scared..."

The doctor told him that without chemotherapy, death was imminent. So began his six-month trek to remission.

What got Howie through the months of poison and fatigue was running. More specifically, planning to run. He decided that he would run the London marathon once he recovered and began to organize a fundraiser around the event from his hospital bed.

"You need to keep your mind active, and so planning to race and organizing events

can give you a focus," says Howie. "I needed that more than the actual running."

Howie was a long-distance runner in high school, but prior to his cancer diagnosis he had not run in seven years.

Howie completed his final round of chemotherapy in August 2014 and began training for London the next month. The first week of September he could barely manage 200 meters. By October 21st he was running a half marathon in Ljubljana.

"The most difficult bit is actually getting off the sofa and doing the first five kilometres," says Howie. "Everything else is just keeping going for a little bit longer, and a little bit longer, and your body can adapt to keep going a little bit further. It's just starting that's hard."

In April, Howie completed the London Marathon. He had gone from a hospital bed to running 42 kilometres in under seven months.

Now, Howie runs marathons on a regular basis to raise money, to increase awareness for colorectal cancer, and to maintain his post-cancer fitness. He has created a website, blog and Facebook page under the name "Charity Runner Neil" to generate support and describe his story and initiatives to potential donors.

Howie's friends, like Alvaro Ballesteros, noticed that the cancer changed him.

"After cancer he is this new person full of energy and passion, looking forward to telling others that recuperation is possible, that cancer doesn't need to mean the end of all, that it is worth giving it a try," says Ballesteros. "Neil has been an amazing example to all around him and he is now a source of hope and inspiration to many."

According to the Centres for Disease Control, colorectal cancer is the third most common form of cancer in the world. Unfortunately, cancer of this type

tends to be overlooked in comparison to its more prominent neighbours, breast and lung cancer.

"It's one of those ones that is actually quite prevalent but people don't want to know about it," says Howie. "It's not nice."

The disease is highly treatable with early detection, yet there are more than 1.3 million cases worldwide and the cancer claims 700,000 lives a year. Many of the funds Howie has raised have gone to

Europacolon, an organization designed to unite patients, healthcare officials, politicians and the media in the fight against colorectal cancer. Howie has shared his story on Europacolon's "Patient Voice" webpage and spoken at conferences to raise awareness for the disease.

"Stories like Neil's help other patients by giving hope, telling them they are not alone," said Zorana Stokić, director of group development at Europacolon.

Howie is not slowing down this year. He recently completed the Palić half-marathon in 1 hour 42 minutes, his fastest time in 20 years. With the Belgrade Marathon approaching in April, Howie has set a goal to raise 1,000 dinars [around €8] for each kilometre he runs between the two races. He has already managed to raise 50,000 dinars [around €405] in the month of February alone.

Howie is not the only one running for charity. Organizers of the Belgrade Marathon are expecting a total of 25,000 people from over 50 countries participating in either the marathon, half-marathon or 5-kilometer "Fun Run" this year.

Many local organizations put together teams to encourage participation and consolidate fundraising efforts. For years, Belhospice, a charity providing treatment to terminal cancer patients, has had the largest running team in the marathon and offers free team training every Sunday.

"It provides great visibility to Belhospice as a charity organization, helping us reach out to people, inform them about services that we provide to cancer patients and raise much-needed funds for the organization through participation and fundraising campaigns of Belhospice team runners," said Dubravka Nešić, spokesperson and fundraising coordinator for Belhospice.

The relationship between fundraising and running is mutually beneficial; the fundraisers gain money and visibility while the runners gain exterior motivation and a tangible manifestation of their achievement in the form of charitable contributions.

Howie said his favourite thing about running in marathons is that the competition is personal.

"There are always people who are going to be faster than you, and you know there are going to be people way slower than you, so the only person you're competing with is yourself," says Howie.

"Winning is getting to the end and being happy with the way things have gone, not coming in first."

After running through the obstacles he has faced in the past two years, it is safe to say that Neil Howie has won his race.

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