

Recovery Running and Dignity

EDITORIAL – Gary Adkisson, The Bismarck Tribune – December 14, 2018

I am thankful Judge David Reich invited us to the screening of the documentary “Skid Row Marathon.”

As part of the annual Santa Run festivities Reich invited California Superior Court Judge Craig Mitchell to participate in the run, and to talk about the award-winning documentary that chronicles his role in helping change the direction of the lives of many men and women in Los Angeles who have fallen into homelessness, generally related to drug and alcohol addictions.

Mitchell, an avid runner, said he sees the impact of addiction as most people passing through his courtroom commit crimes that are usually traced back to drug and alcohol use and addiction.

Mitchell said he grew frustrated as he watched the repetitious cycle of drug and alcohol abuse, addiction, homelessness, crime, incarceration, treatment and release, generally back into the same situation the men and women were in previously.

Mitchell said he walked over to the Midnight Shelter, located in the Skid Row section of downtown Los Angeles near the judge’s office and courtroom, and asked, “What can I do to help?” The director’s response was simple: spend some time with them.

Mitchell decided to carve out time three days at 5:45 a.m. to meet at the shelter and go running with anyone who wanted to run. He said he believed he could build relationships by coaching, training and encouraging health and discipline in a way that was not possible in his role as a judge.

Before long, Mitchell said, he had a regular group, with three or four who were especially dedicated. They are featured in the documentary.

The core group began training for a marathon and began to participate in the Los Angeles and other area marathons. But the breakthrough idea for Mitchell was to take his group on an international trip where they would run a marathon in some of the world’s greatest cities.

Three of the core group of four runners went to Africa for their first marathon. For each of them it was their first international trip and first exposure to another culture. The judge raised the funds from friends and colleagues to cover the cost for each participant.

Mitchell said the transformative idea was that this opportunity, the chance to travel, to experience other cultures and to commit to a goal and succeed gave the three men dignity — a sense of worth, self-respect and pride — which they had never experienced in life.

The program has grown each year, with between 20 and 30 running in Rome, Vietnam and Jerusalem.

While the international travel is a highlight of the program, the real transformation taking place is that these individuals are going back to school, earning degrees, entering the workplace with good jobs, reconnecting with their families and mentoring others who, but for their intervention, would likely end up in the addiction cycle.

Reich was inspired to begin a similar effort in Bismarck and invites anyone interested in making a difference to join him and his group, Runners Against Destructive Decisions, any Tuesday, Thursday or

Saturday at the YMCA east lobby. This link will give you more information:
www.bismarcksantarun.com/radd-info.html.

The documentary trailer may be viewed at vimeo.com/191530706

When we read or hear about the issues of addiction in our country the problem seems overwhelming or hopeless. But Reich and Mitchell are a bit like the character in "The Star Thrower" or "Sara and the Starfish" who, while they see the proverbial beach littered with a seemingly impossible number of addicts and recovering addicts, take pleasure in knowing they at least helped the one they threw back in the sea.

Our communities are enriched by their efforts and they are worthy of our encouragement and support.