

American Odyssey relay features local runners

BY SCOT ANDREW PITZER
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For five years, Upper Adams native Sera Snyder had what most people in their mid-20s would consider a dream job.

After graduating from West Chester University in 2004, she landed a gig in finance with Lincoln Financial in Philadelphia.

It was everything she could have hoped for as a young professional, but Snyder wasn't emotionally satisfied.

That's when she found Back On My Feet, a non-profit agency that promotes self-sufficiency of the homeless, by engaging them in running programs to build confidence, strength and self-esteem.

Snyder's organization is one of 126 teams running in the "American Odyssey Relay" this weekend – a 205-mile race from Gettysburg to Washington D.C. The race spans national his-

RUNNING

toric sites, such as the 6,000-acre Gettysburg Battlefield, Antietam and other landmarks.

"I'm fortunate that I've found something I'm so passionate about so early in my life," said the 28-year-old Snyder, a 2000 graduate of Biglerville High School. The Back On My Feet team contains 12 registered participants, who will each run three legs in the two-day event.

Other local participants in the second-year event include Biglerville High School alum Michael Bupp, who is participating with the team Superheroes In Training. He is running with Brett Smith, of Mechanicsburg, Mark Clowney, of Gettysburg, Phil Biesecker and Justin Hockley, among others.

According to event spokeswoman Debbie Redman, most teams contain 12 participants, while some have nine or six members. One

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SUBMITTED PHOTOGRAPH

A team from Back On My Feet, a Philadelphia-based organization that works with the homeless, is competing in the American Odyssey Relay this weekend, which begins in Gettysburg and concludes in Washington D.C. Pictured from left are: Reese, a member of the agency; Back On My Feet Program Director Sera Snyder, a Biglerville High School graduate; and Terrell, another member of the group.

Race

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individual is running the entire race alone. There are a total of 36 legs in the relay, with two vans accompanying the teams.

"It's an adult slumber party. They run all night long," says Redman. "Nobody stops."

Last year, a team of Bucknell University graduates won the inaugural event in 23 hours. Redman says it can take up to 35 hours to finish the event. A portion of the registration proceeds are being donated to a veterans group and cancer research organization.

Overall, the relay spans 205 miles atop historic lands and countryside throughout Adams County, West Virginia and northern Maryland, before concluding in the nation's capital. Historic landmarks along the way include two covered bridges; Michaux State Forest; Sharpsburg, Md. — home of the Antietam Battlefield — Harpers Ferry; Shepherdstown, W.Va., and the Jefferson Memorial.

"When we first planned the American Odyssey route, we wanted something more meaningful than just another course," said Race Director Bob Fleshner.

"We worked very hard to touch as many Civil War sites as possible, so the Gettysburg start was a natural," continues Fleshner. "During our inaugural race in 2009, many runners told us how moved they were by the battlefields at Gettysburg and Antietam and we know the 2010 runners will feel the same emotions."

Snyder, who now serves as the program director for Back On My Feet, is running the first leg for her relay team Friday morning, here in Adams County. She felt that the Back On My Feet program gave so much meaning and purpose to her life that she left her job with Lincoln Financial, and now runs with registered homeless shelter residents three days a week.

"It teaches you that no matter what walk of life you're from, you can do anything that you put your mind to," Snyder says regarding Back On My Feet.

The Aspers native started volunteer work with the organization back in Dec. 2007, jogging at 5:30 a.m. with residents of 17 participating homeless shelters throughout Philadelphia. The program aims to challenge homeless individuals

with running as a way to build self confidence. Back On My Feet also provides education and job placement for their members after they have shown proven dedication and commitment.

The program's founder, Anne Mahlum, who will also be running this weekend.

"The members of Back on My Feet inspire me every day. I am continuously amazed at our members drive, commitment and amazing spirit. They challenge me to be a better person," says Snyder.

More than 100 homeless residents are engaged in the program in Philly, as well as another 250-plus volunteers. The agency has become so popular that it has expanded into Baltimore and Washington D.C., and branch programs are launching in Boston this May, as well as Chicago, Ill., in the fall.

For more information on the American Odyssey Relay Race, visit www.americanodysseyrelay.com. For more information on Back On My Feet, visit www.backonmyfeet.org or email Sera Snyder at sera@backonmyfeet.org.