2017 Virgin Money London Marathon Runners’ Stories

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Chris ARTHEY
Godalming, Surrey
Charity: Leonard Cheshire Disability

Chris and his wife, Denise, were in a life-changing road accident in 2008 while on a motorcycle holiday in America when a drunk driver crashed into them. Chris was in a coma for days, and both he and Denise lost their left legs above the knee. But, after a long and painful recovery, the sport-loving couple were determined to get back to physical fitness. Chris said: “It was very important to focus on our progress, however small, rather than how far we still had to go.”

Chris has always competed in endurance sports and, using prosthetic legs, he has already run a marathon, competed in triathlons at Olympic distance and climbed Mount Kilimanjaro. Now he’s back for his fifth London Marathon.

Chris, 61, is running to raise funds for Leonard Cheshire Disability, which supports disabled people to fulfil their potential and live life as they choose. Chris said: “The Hydon Hill Cheshire Home is just a few yards from our cottage. They do excellent work with their residents and deserve all the help they can get.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/ChrisArthey

Francesca BALON
Leigh, Greater Manchester
Charity: Guide Dogs for the Blind

Francesca is running the Virgin Money London Marathon for Guide Dogs for the Blind because they “changed her life.”

Born with a hereditary condition, Francesca is registered severely sight impaired. For her, the world is constantly out of focus and she struggles with bright sunlight and night blindness.

Now, 20, and a university student, Francesca had a difficult time at mainstream school where exclusion and name-calling shattered her confidence. She said: “I started to feel like what they were saying was true, I so wanted to fit in, but resigned myself to not being accepted.”

Bullying led to weight-gain which only made things worse, so in a bid to take control, she stopped eating and started over-exercising. Thankfully her family noticed and sent her to the GP which, eventually, resulted in a diagnosis of anorexia and anxiety at 17. She said: “For a long time I refused to acknowledge my eating disorder. I still struggle but I’ve come a long way in my attitude towards being healthy.”

Francesca’s family had been accessing the services of BCUK, part of Guide Dogs for the Blind, since she was a baby and, when she needed them most, they provided encouragement and support. Francesca said: “I’m running to support Guide Dogs so they can continue to provide life-changing, vital support to others like me. We owe them so much.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/FrancescaBalon
Helen BROWNE
Byfleet, Surrey
Charity: Shooting Star Chase Children’s Hospice

Helen vowed never to run another marathon following what she described as a disastrous attempt at the Paris Marathon in 2009 – but the loss of her daughter Orla after just three days changed her mind.

Orla was born last July with Jeune syndrome resulting in her having a very small chest and short ribs. Her lungs were not able to grow properly and she was not expected to be able to breathe independently. She spent most of her life at Shooting Stars Chase Children’s Hospice.

The family, including Orla’s four-year-old brother, were able to experience three days of love and cuddles, spend time in the sensory room and explore the gardens. “They have been a great support with counselling and we often go to visit. Our son loves going back and connects the sensory room with Orla as this is where she was at her happiest,” said Helen. Having registered for a charity place with Shooting Star a couple of days after Orla died it gave Helen, 35, a focus and a goal to work towards. “I know there will be a whole range of emotions and there is bound to be tears along the way, but it will be the culmination of months of training and has been my main focus since losing Orla – so I want to do it justice and make her proud.”

Fundraising link: www.virginmoneygiving.com/helenbrownelm

Trevor BUTTON
Ilford, Essex
Charity: TBAP Foundation

Trevor is running his first Virgin Money London Marathon for the TBAP Foundation which offers disadvantaged and marginalised youngsters a better chance at life.

Button is assistant head teacher at the TBAP 16-19 Academic AP Academy in Fulham which opened in September last year. The school provides an academic curriculum that meets the needs of learners with the potential to go on to higher education.

His students have the ability, but are unable to access mainstream education due to social, emotional or learning difficulties.

Trevor said: “These children have a real chance to progress with the right teaching and support. For many, we really are their last chance.

“We aim to keep them in education and move them forward in a positive way, helping them achieve their potential.”

Trevor, 39, will be raising money to invest back into the Trust, providing resources from books and uniforms to educational trips.

“I’m basically running for my students, many of them who’ve had challenging home lives, been through trying circumstances, and it’s our job to get them back on track,” he said. I’m really excited to be part of such a great event, and raising money for something I’m a part of is a real bonus.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/TrevorButton
Angela CAVANAGH
Basingstoke, Hampshire
Charity: Basingstoke Counselling Service

Angela is running the Virgin Money London Marathon to raise awareness of mental health issues after fighting her own battle with depression. After the birth of her first child, Angela was diagnosed with post-natal depression and admitted to a mother and baby unit in Basingstoke for three months.

After being discharged she received counselling to help her deal with her depression and felt she was keeping it in check.

However, when she and her husband decided to add to their family, nothing could have prepared them for what was to come. Again diagnosed with post-natal depression, she was admitted to a mother and baby unit for four months.

Her depression meant she was unable to care for her daughters and they were eventually placed on the ‘at risk’ register, something that causes Angela deep pain and embarrassment to this day, despite knowing it wasn’t her fault.

Faced with losing her husband and two young daughters, Angela twice tried to commit suicide. Thankfully, with the help of family and a counsellor, Angela, 39, has been able to move forward with her life. She will be running the marathon, hoping to raise £1,800 for Basingstoke Counselling Service, where she has worked for the past year.

She said: “I’m in a completely different place now but so many people aren’t; I want them to know there’s help available. I’m looking forward to the challenge; I know it will be hard, but nowhere near as hard as post-natal depression.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/AngelaCavanagh

Pippa, Henrietta & Will CREASY
Poole, Dorset
Charity: Heads Together and CALM

Pippa’s husband Dr Terry Creasy tragically committed suicide four years ago following an acute battle with depression. In his memory, Pippa, 59, and two of her four children, Henrietta and Will, have joined the Virgin Money London Marathon’s Charity of the Year Heads Together to run this year’s race. They will be raising awareness of suicide - the biggest cause of death in men under the age of 45 in the UK, and working with Heads Together to get people talking about mental health, and to encourage more people to talk with one another about their problems. The family will be fundraising for one of Heads Together’s Charity Partners - CALM (the campaign against living miserably), which is dedicated to preventing male suicide.

Henrietta said: “CALM is an amazing charity that works tirelessly to try to prevent male suicide through promoting mental health and also starting a conversation with regards to males and how they are feeling and asking for help.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/team/CreasyHeadsTogether
Zamzam FARAH
London
Charity: The Running Charity

Zamzam competed in the women’s 400 metres in the London 2012 Olympic Games for Somalia determined to show her country that women could, and should be able to, compete on an equal footing with men. This led to her and her family receiving death threats from people who claimed to have connections to a militant group in Somalia. Fearing for her safety, she claimed asylum in the UK and tried to begin a new life.

She initially stayed with relations, but they would only allow her to stay if she agreed to work at home for them and not pursue her education or a career. She left but struggled to find somewhere to live until The Running Charity came to her aid.

Zamzam is now employed, rents privately and will be The Running Charity's nominated runner for this year's Virgin Money London Marathon. The Running Charity is funded by The London Marathon Events Ltd and provides the UK’s first running-orientated programme for homeless and vulnerable young people.

Angela FIELD
Windsor, Berkshire
Charity: The Cancer Treatment & Research Trust

Angela ran the Virgin Money London Marathon in 2013 and vowed she’d never do it again, but, having been diagnosed with incurable lung cancer, she’s determined to make the Start Line this year and raise funds for The Cancer Treatment and Research Trust. She said: “This time it’s about more than ticking a box on the bucket list. It’s about fighting this awful disease and not letting it beat me.”

In 2014 Angela was told she had inoperable tumours in her lungs, liver, adrenal glands and lymph nodes. She signed up for the marathon in 2015 and started training once treatment had shrunk the tumours. She said: “By December I was back to running 10 miles but I hadn’t banked on the cancer fighting back.”

She began to get breathless and a CT scan revealed a large blood clot on her lung. Despite medication, another scan in January showed two more clots had developed.

Determined, she decided she’d still take part in the marathon, even if she had to walk, completing the course in six hours three minutes. When her young son suggested she go back for a third time this year, she initially dismissed the idea but soon changed her mind.

She said: “It felt like unfinished business. In 2015 cancer conspired against me.” Although she’s undergoing chemotherapy every three weeks, which leaves her feeling sick and tired, Angela, 42, insists she will do everything in her power to make the Start Line, saying: “I’ll train and raise as much money as I can for CTRT. Because I can, and I will. Just watch me.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/Angela.Field
Didi Mae and Joccoaa Hand will run the Virgin Money London Marathon for Trinity Hospice which helped care for their dad Kevin in his final weeks. Joccoaa said: “Sadly there’s no glamour in palliative care, no miracles, nor cures. The victories may seem small, but they are powerful and they mean the world to people going through such testing times, allowing someone to pass on with as much dignity, as much comfort and as little pain as possible.”

Kevin died at home surrounded by his wife and children thanks to Trinity Hospice’s 24-hour support.

At 19 Didi suffered a broken pelvis in a car accident. Determined not to let the incident define her, she battled back to health and ran the London Marathon with her dad in 2010.

This year, a year after Kevin’s death, Didi, now 27, will be back along with her sister, 25, to run in memory of their father.

Didi said: “He embraced life with a restless determination, a hunger to learn and an urge to always be outdoors. Just 64, a fit and healthy triathlete and avid cyclist, there seems no more fitting way to honour him than challenge ourselves in a similar way.

“We will, of course, be hurting in more ways than one, but we know he’ll be supporting us as he always has.”

Mike’s husband Glenn lost both his mother and brother, Allan, to dissected aortic aneurysms within just six months.

The coroner’s report suggested Allan showed signs of Marfan Syndrome, a protein deficiency in DNA which leads to connective tissue disorder. He advised all close family members be screened and Glenn was diagnosed with an aortic aneurysm just above his heart.

Mike said: “Glenn had no time to grieve. He went from feeling fit and healthy to vulnerable and terrified overnight.”

Glenn had surgery in 2011, aged 35, and was forced to have a mechanical aortic valve fitted, leaving him on a daily regime of painkillers and blood thinners to prevent his body rejecting the valve and reduce further aneurysms.

In 2014 Glenn had a stroke which continues to affect him today. It’s also been discovered that he has a rarer condition, Mothers Against Decapentaplegic Homolog 3 (SMAD3), from the same family as Marfan.

Mike said: “It was a dark time, seeing the person you love, your best friend and soul mate going through physical and mental hell and feeling absolutely helpless.”

The Marfan Trust has been a huge support to Glenn, and other family members since diagnosed.

Mike, 37, said: “I’m running to raise money and awareness of Marfan Syndrome but also because I know the hell I put my body through is nothing compared to the pain Glenn goes through every day. That’s what motivates me and keeps me running.”
Judy Lewis
Hanwell, West London
Charity: Charles Wolfson Centre for Reconstructive Surgery at the Royal Free Hospital.

Judy Lewis is running the Virgin Money London Marathon without either of her fibulas, which were used in reconstructive surgery after she was diagnosed and treated for a rare type of cancer, Spindle Cell Sarcoma. The procedure is known as a Fibular Free Flap Resection and Reconstruction of the Lower Mandible. In the space of three months Judy had to learn to walk, talk and eat again – twice over.

All of Judy’s treatment has been at University College London Hospital. One of the professors who is treating her at UCLH is from the Royal Free Hospital and it is the Charles Wolfson Centre for Reconstructive Surgery at the Royal Free Hospital that she is fundraising for.

Running to Judy is so much more than keeping fit, or running a good time.

“It’s about being alive and well, and never for one minute taking that for granted,” said the 46 year old.

As a result of running, Judy’s bone density results are similar to that of a woman her age who has not had treatment for cancer or the menopause – and Judy has had both.

Judy feels as if the Virgin Money London Marathon is the start of her long distance running journey. She is keen to meet other runners who may have had similar surgery. "I'm the only patient who has taken up running that my consultants are aware of. So this is a bit of a first for them too."

Haroon Mota
Coventry, Warwickshire
Charity: Penny Appeal

Haroon is raising funds for Penny Appeal, a humanitarian charity working across the globe to find water solutions, food, orphan care and medical aid in disaster and conflict-affected areas. His fundraising efforts, which have seen him run 30 marathons, skydiving and bungee jumping, will contribute towards bringing clean, safe water to poor communities in Senegal.

He said: “My father, Hafiz Kasim Mota, was always striving to make life better for others. He is my motivation and I’m determined to make this challenge a success to make him proud.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/fundraiser-web/running4dad
Rachel PEEL
Plymouth, Devon
Charity: Royal British Legion

Rachel ran her first Virgin Money London Marathon in 2013, but this time training will be exceptionally tough. Currently serving in the Royal Navy on a six-month-deployment in the Gulf, putting in the miles is something of a challenge, particularly with just four treadmills for more than 700 people.

“It’s going as well as it can, given the circumstances,” Rachel said. “Along with treadmills, we can use the flight deck, albeit very rarely, when there are no operations taking place. Even then it’s only a whisker over 200m long which, as you can imagine, gets rather repetitive if you’re looking to run 20 plus miles.”

Rachel, 26, is looking forward to the marathon experience. She said: “I have to say it’s the atmosphere surrounding the whole event that stood out most for me last time.”

Rachel will run with a fellow member of the ship’s company and, she said they’ve received immense support from fellow shipmates.

She said: “They’ve been very encouraging and our superiors have been flexible with our working hours, giving us time to undertake longer runs and more endurance-based training.”

She is running for the Royal British Legion due to its support for the military. Rachel said: “While I’ve no direct personal experience, given our environment there’s a plethora of second-hand stories of people who’ve been aided by them. That support ranges from helping out family affected by injury during service by providing funded days out, to running care homes throughout the country to assist veterans and their families.”

Danny PHILLIPS
Oxford, Oxfordshire
Charity: Lawrence Home Nursing Team

Danny is running the Virgin Money London Marathon in memory of his mother Jane who died, aged 57 in 2011 after a long battle with cancer.

Jane was instrumental in setting up the Lawrence Home Nursing Team which offers end of life care to terminally ill patients in their own homes.

Tragically Jane – who was awarded an MBE for her charity work – needed the charity’s care when she fell ill with cancer.

Danny, 27, said: “The irony is that my mother, who helped set up this wonderful charity and worked for them, was then cared for by these skilled nurses at the end of her life.

“I can’t describe what their care meant to us as a family. It enabled mum to pass away in her home, which is what she wanted, and provided top quality end-of-life care.”

Danny’s training is going well, he’s joined a running club which, he says, has been crucial in helping him get the right training and avoiding injury.

“I can’t wait for race day to arrive,” he said. “I’ve taken part in many fundraising events and this will be the biggest and most emotional challenge for me yet, but I know mum will keep me going. I know I will be pulled through by her.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/DannyPhillips
As the director of a hospital with a major trauma unit, Lesley sees the devastating impact of life-changing injuries every day.

She said: “We see patients with limb loss, with paralysis and these people can feel their lives are now limited. I’m running the Virgin Money London Marathon for Leonard Cheshire Disability because they don’t do limited. They work tirelessly to ensure people with disabilities fulfil their potential and get to live the life that they want to live. They campaign for change and challenge the ignorance around disability.

“Having lined up for the London Marathon before with wheelchair athletes and runners with a range of disabilities - that really resonated with me.

“Everyone on the Start Line just wants to be the best they can be on the day.”

Lesley, 46, is up at 5.15am several mornings a week to fit in training and, despite the cold mornings, is on track and really looking forward to her third London Marathon.

“Training is tough through winter, but you have to keep your eye on the prize,” she says. “I love the London Marathon, you always finish feeling like an absolute superhero.”

At the beginning of 2014, David Rooms’ daughter Hope, then aged 12, was diagnosed with Rhabdomyosarcoma – an aggressive type of cancer, from a lump at the base of her spine. Over the next 18 months she went through chemotherapy and radiotherapy. This meant a 110-mile round trip from their home in East Yorkshire to Leeds.

In the autumn of 2015 her parents were given the positive news that Hope would go on to live a normal, healthy life. However she became unwell on Christmas Day. David said: “In early January we got the news no parent wants to hear, that the cancer had returned. Seven weeks later I had been to my local parkrun and on my return my wife was stood outside our house. Hope had passed away peacefully in her sleep.”

David, 54, is running the Virgin Money London Marathon in Hope’s memory. He is raising money for Candlelighters, a children’s cancer charity that provide invaluable support for patients and their families across Yorkshire.

Rooms said: “A great deal of money raised goes towards funding cancer research. I can think of no other charity than the one closest to my heart.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/ForHope
Jackie and fiancé Duncan will have a marathon experience like no other. The pair will get married on the Cutty Sark at 7:30am on Race Day before racing to the Start Line at Blackheath with Jackie in a specially-designed marathon-friendly wedding dress and Duncan in his groom's suit.

Their story to this magical day is inspiring and heart-warming. Jackie, 35 had her pelvis rebuilt in 2007 then, just three weeks after getting engaged, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy.

It was then that she started to run “to feel alive at a time when my body had other ideas” with Duncan joining her as a running partner. As their thoughts turned to wedding planning, the idea of exchanging vows before running the Virgin Money London Marathon “to thank the people who helped us find our way back to happiness both during and after treatment” was born. The couple will be running the 2017 Virgin Money London Marathon for Breast Cancer Care and The Willow Foundation.

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/team/charitywedding

Paul Spindler is running the Virgin Money London Marathon to raise awareness for Children with Cancer UK and in memory of his son Benjamin.

Twenty five years ago, Paul's world was turned upside down when his new-born son Benjamin was diagnosed with Neuroblastoma, an aggressive form of cancer.

The family were shocked and scared but their fears were allayed by specialists at the Royal Marsden Hospital. Benjamin had a chest line put in to make administration of the specialised drugs easier, and the routine of treating him in hospital had begun.

However, Benjamin's immune system was virtually destroyed and the slightest infections were a problem. For 12 weeks he fought hard through his treatment and he responded well. But on November 16, 1990 at 7.50pm, Benjamin died.

Paul, 52, wants people to know how vital their donations are in helping fight against this disease. Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/fundraiser-web/fundraiser/showFundraiserProfilePage.action?userUrl=paul-spindler-SAVMLMBONDS3332017-86607558
Abi Tilley
Sleaford, Lincolnshire
Charity: Pancreatic Cancer UK

Abi is running the Virgin Money London Marathon in memory of her mum Anne who she describes as her hero and best friend.

Anne died suddenly last year of pancreatic cancer, just six weeks after she had been diagnosed with the disease.

She had visited the doctor countless times but was told it was back ache and her condition was not detected until Abi, 22, had to rush her to hospital at 3am.

Only when Anne got emotional did doctors decide to do a blood test. Biopsies followed and scans until they were given the news that it had advanced so much there was nothing they could do. Her mum died peacefully last October.

To give her something to focus on she took on the challenge of the marathon. She wants to raise awareness of this silent killer and run in memory, not just of her mum, but of those who have lost their lives and the families they’ve left behind. She said: “Everyday someone else has to experience what my family went through - greater awareness of the disease and symptoms is the key to increasing survival.”

Fundraising link: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/AbiTilley

Kate Tompsett
Hawkhurst, Kent
Charity: ARC (Antenatal Results and Choices)

Kate Tompsett is running her first Virgin Money London Marathon in memory of her daughter Rose and son Leo.

Rose was delivered at 22 weeks after she was diagnosed with Trisomy 18 or Trisomy 13 – lethal syndromes that cause severe birth defects – while Kate lost Leo at 14 weeks.

Kate, 35, and her husband Rich were left with a soul-searching decision when doctors told them about Rose’s condition.

The impossible choice was to continue to carry Rose who would, at best, die within a few hours or undergo a medical termination.

In the end they chose for Kate to deliver her baby at 22 weeks and both parents were able to spend one night with her, taking photos for their memory box.

Kate said: “When they said she wouldn’t make it, my whole life came crashing down. She’s part of our family, as is Leo who we lost at 14 weeks last year.”

Kate started running to help cope with her grief. She is now taking on the London Marathon for ARC which supported her through her losses.

She said: “I used to avoid challenges but now I know that if I can survive the last two years, 26 miles is nothing.”

Fundraising page: uk.virginmoneygiving.com/
George Ward decided to run her first Virgin Money London Marathon for the LGTB Foundation after meeting the love of her life last year.

The couple plan to marry and, as George says, without the work of organisations like the LGTB Foundation, that simply would not be possible.

She said: “All of a sudden something clicked and I realised that without people fighting for equal marriage rights, we wouldn’t have been able to do it. Also my partner is Polish and the struggle for equal rights and recognition of same sex marriage is still very real in her country.

“She has told me stories of marching in Pride parades in Poland and having to have the police march on either side to protect her from rocks being hurled and people threatening to kill her. Hearing something like that from someone you love makes you realise what a strong position we’re in compared to other countries and how much work there is still to be done.”

It will be a first marathon for George, 28, who admits she is neither a seasoned athlete nor veteran fundraiser, but she’s determined to show her appreciation for the tireless work of the LGTB Foundation.

She said: “I’d never done any fundraising before because, I think, you always feel someone else will. Now I realise how important the LGTB Foundation’s work is and I’m determined to raise as much as possible for them.”