

Running with Jan

BURLINGTON RUNNERS STAY IN SHAPE AND FIGHT CANCER—TOGETHER



Top: Training in a group for any event is always fun. Above: Mary Grunvald has five TNT events under her belt and has raised \$15,000. Keith Olson, soon to turn 80, has been a delightful member of the group.

Jan Leja has spent 13 years building a community based on fitness, friendship, and fighting cancer. How does one accomplish this? It's simple—just run every Sunday.

"I love Vermont," says Leja. "So the idea of running at a different venue every Sunday came naturally." Each week Leja posts the location of the upcoming Sunday group run on his website RunwithJan.com (pronounced "Yawn"). Locations rotate among Leja's favorite running spots in Burlington, Essex, Colchester, Richmond, and other sites. On Sunday, group runners arrive at 8:15am (7:30am in summertime, to beat the heat) and socialize, exchange hugs, and catch up until Leja reins them in. "Good morning everyone!" he says, pulling his camera from his bag. The participants gather for a group shot, and then everyone goes running (or walking), each person at his or her own pace and chosen distance. ▶



Support & Camaraderie

Over the miles, the group splinters into small factions, but afterward, everyone gathers at a predetermined breakfast spot. It is the breakfast sessions that concern Susan Criscuolo, who has been running with Jan since 2007. “Beware,” she says, if you plan to join the group for a Sunday breakfast. “You might find yourself signing up for running events you never intended to.”

Take, for example, a group run last September. With anywhere from 10 to 40 runners in attendance on a given Sunday run, this one was on the small side, and runners gathered at the deli counter at South Burlington’s Healthy Living Market afterward. “Maybe we should run the Philadelphia Marathon,” someone suggested.

The comment drew some laughs, but Leja sent a few e-mails that afternoon. Within two days, 14 runners had registered for Philly. They trained together,



descended on The City of Brotherly Love in November, and all of them completed the 26.2-mile race. Likewise, 49 group runners participated in Burlington’s January 1 First Run, held this year on a Saturday. At the weekly group run the following day, 37 ran and brunched.

Running for Cancer

In 1998, Leja joined the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society’s Team in Training (TNT), which trains participants for marathons, half-marathons, triathlons, century rides, and hiking



Left: Run with Jan-ers (from left) Rose Bergeron, Joy Livingston, and Jen Nachburat at the Corporate Cup 2010, Montpelier. Below: Jan Leja competes.

events while they raise money to support the fight against blood cancers. Leja walked his first marathon in Anchorage, Alaska, raising \$4,600.

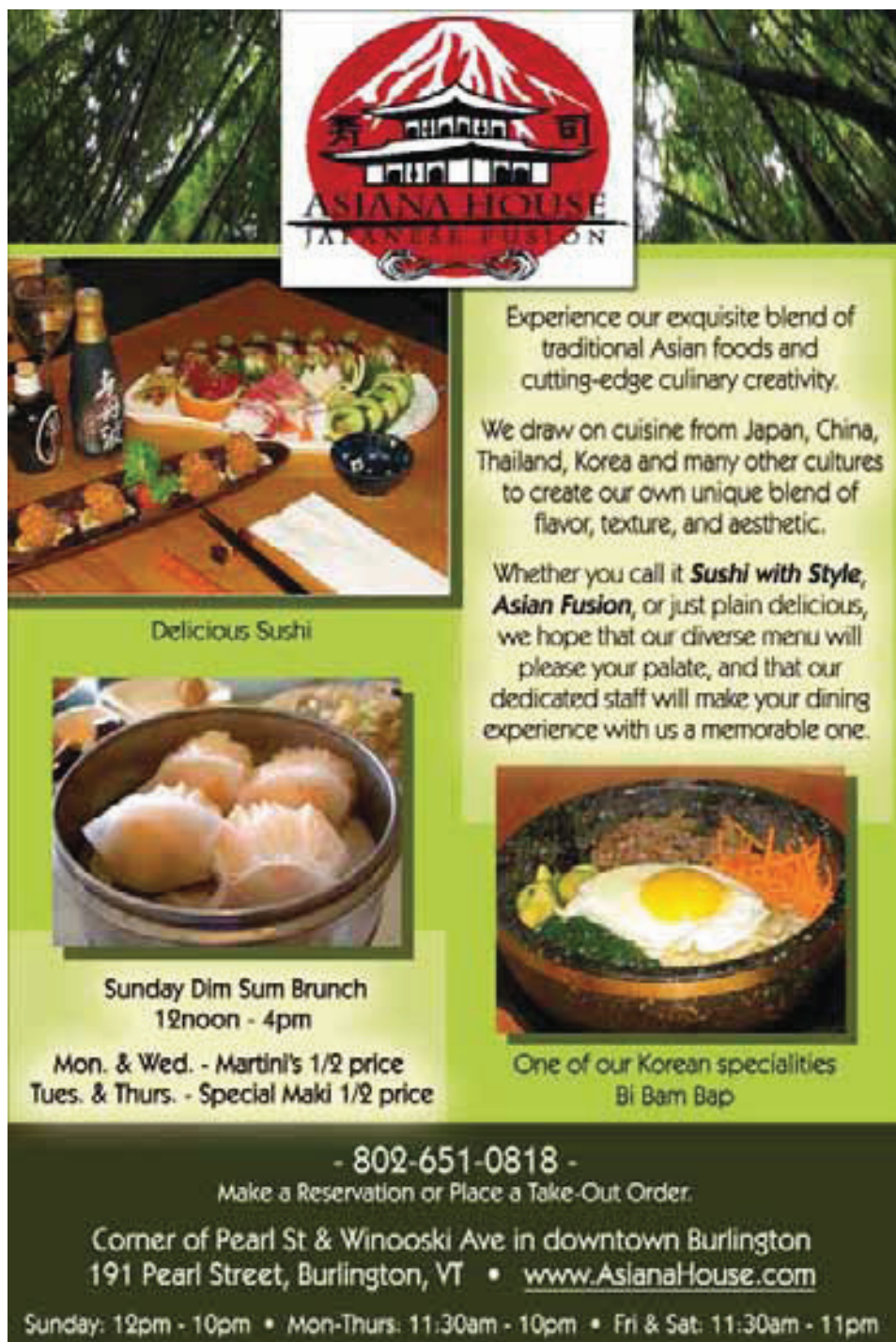
He became TNT's volunteer walking coach in 2001 and then the running coach in 2003. As running coach, he met a group of runners who had fundraised and run in the previous season's Disney Marathon. Several of these runners became TNT mentors and all of them continued running with him. And Run with Jan was born.

Leja's Sunday running group consists of fundraising TNT participants, TNT alumni, and friends. But TNT participants who join the organization in Vermont get more than workout plans from Leja. They gain entry into a community of supporters, friends, and inspiring people. Fundraising isn't so daunting when you run every Sunday with 30 people who have fundraised themselves. And jogging on a rainy Sunday isn't so unappealing when you know the rest of the group will be there rain or shine. Jennifer Nachbur of Burlington joined TNT in 2006 after her mother was diagnosed with leukemia. She didn't consider herself an athlete then; a mother of three, she balanced a full-time job and many volunteer activities. "I wasn't physically active," she says. "I didn't have a lot of extra time—or at least *perceived* extra time—to exercise."

Nachbur joined as a walker and fundraised for the Lake Placid half-marathon. Five years later—now as a runner ("Walking was too cold," she says)—she ran her first marathon this fall, raising \$4,700. She did it in her mother Diana Adams Nachbur's honor and with the support of her running group. "With this kind of support," says Robyn Haberman, campaign director for the Upstate New York and Vermont Chapter of Team in Training, "people realize they can accomplish more than they ever imagined."

The Running Bug

While Burlington ranks at or near the top of national surveys ranking healthy cities in which to live, there is a little-known but highly contagious virus plaguing the area: the running bug. Signs and symp-



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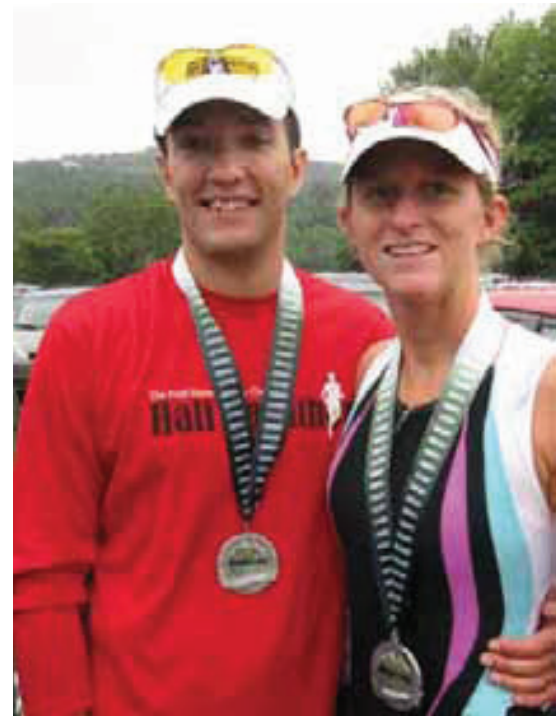
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toms include good health, an inclination to smile and laugh, and increased levels of self-esteem. Members of running groups, particularly Run with Jan, are especially susceptible.

Take Susan Criscuolo, who has trouble getting excited to run long distances alone (who wouldn't?). "The Sunday runs are amazing, fun, and motivational," she says. It's inspiring, says Criscuolo, to join forces with ordinary people who share their running schedules, their goals, and their accomplishments. "Each week I come across another person crazier than the last," says Criscuolo. "It makes me want to keep doing this, to keep taking care of my body, and to keep turning people on to running."

Criscuolo may not exactly be in a position to comment on crazy runners; she seems to have a fairly heavy case of the running bug herself. Training with Leja in 2007 for her first marathon, Criscuolo



Top: Montreal Marathon, September 2010. Above left: Marty and Kristen Courcelle, Triple Crown members, have completed marathons, a century ride (100 miles), and an Olympic distance triathlon for TNT. Above: Mitchell, an accomplished member of the Run with Jan jogging stroller division, and his super mom Angela Duquette, TNT alum, marathoner, and rider.

raised over \$5,000 for TNT and completed the San Francisco Nike Women's Marathon. "I believed in the cause," she says. She has run three marathons since, two as fundraisers. Her most recent TNT event was the Dublin Marathon, for which she had to raise \$6,250. Despite a generous network of family and friends, this figure made even Criscuolo blink. By the time Dublin came around, the cause became personal for Criscuolo; her fiancé's cousin was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. "It became a great way to include her in my marathon journey," Criscuolo says. Still, how to raise \$6,250?

She talked to friends, brainstormed, and went to work. When the dust finally



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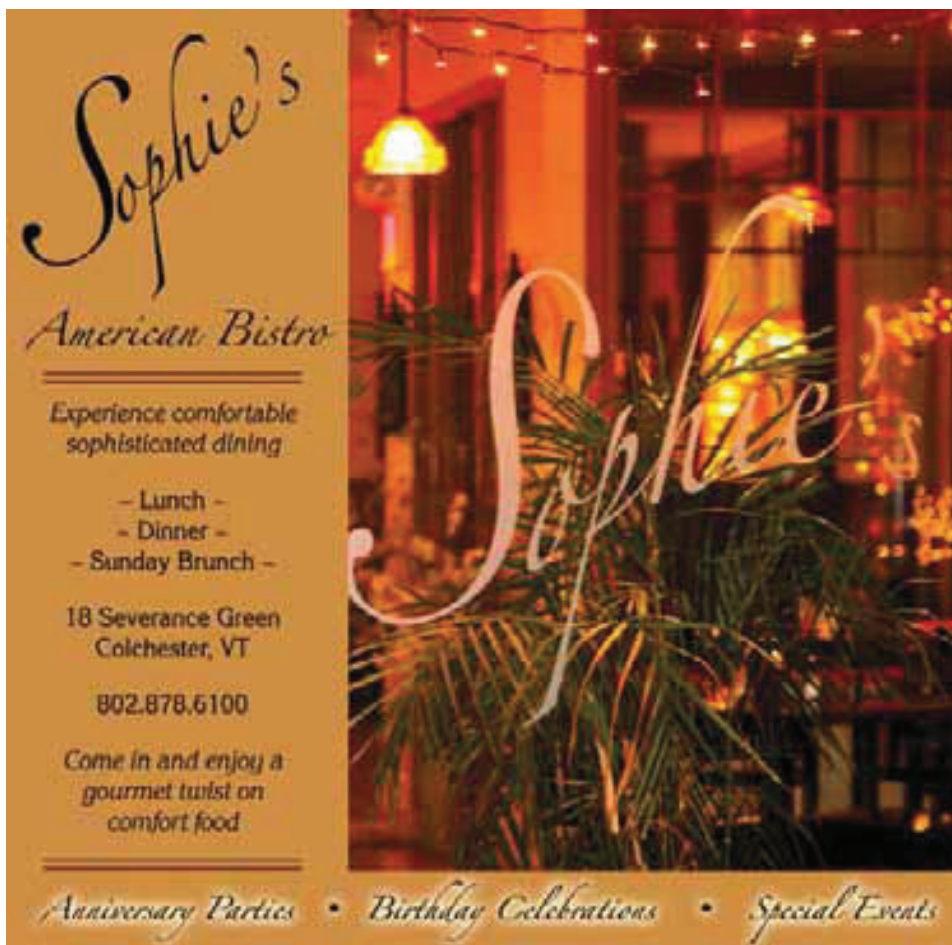
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settled, Criscuolo had organized her own race event. The Downtown 10K in Burlington takes place on the last Sunday in September, with Criscuolo's employer, Green Mountain Rehabilitation and Sports Medicine, as the title sponsor with all proceeds going to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. "I had to learn everything about putting on a race event," says Criscuolo. The inaugural event drew 120 runners in 2009 and nearly double that in 2010. Perfectly timed as a training event for many fall marathon and half-marathon events, many local runners now have the 10K programmed into their mental training calendars.

Heart of the Group

At the center of the community is Leja. "He has this omnipresence among this huge group of runners," says Criscuolo. Donating his time, he places water before group runs. He supports runners and helps fundraisers. "He's the heart of the group," she says.

Leja admits he is a poor "sideline" coach. He has run 27 marathons himself and served as a TNT coach at 11 others. As a coach, he often runs distances greater than 26.2 miles, running alongside athletes, encouraging them to the finish and then heading back out to cheer others. It is challenging, he says, to organize a group with an age span from teens to 80-year-olds and an ability span from walkers to sub-three-hour marathoners and ultra-runners.

But he learns from his own group, and what seems challenging is not insurmountable. So his group is open to all and fundraising is not required (although many have become inspired to fundraise). Runners should consider themselves warned: the running bug is contagious and no one is immune. Running with Jan could change your life, too.

Helpful Websites

Run with Jan official website:
www.RunwithJan.com

Team in Training:
www.teamintraining.org

Burlington's Downtown 10K:
www.greenmtrehab.com