

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



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Runners have raucous day at Montecito Half-Marathon

From the dark depths of the personal hell of addiction, emerged a life committed towards helping others.

Six years ago, Robert Gilcrest was stuck in a potentially downward alcohol induced spiral that seemingly had no escape. But inspiring words from a sage outdoor voice initiated a life change that not only saved him and his family, but prompted him to promote a healthy lifestyle while directly benefitting members of this community through running.

Today, Gilcrest's Blacksmith Endurance Company is putting on the inaugural Run Montecito-Summerland Half Marathon. Beginning at 8 a.m., over 500 runners and walkers will participate in events that included the 13.1-mile distance, a 10k, a 5k, and a 1k kids run, to benefit Kidz for a Cure, a non-profit run by local youth Madison Lewandowski.

All of this was started by one man's struggle.

"The bottom was dropping out in my life," Gilcrest said. "I was on the verge of losing my family, everything."

In the throes of his addiction but wanting to make a change in his life, Gilcrest attended a book reading given by legendary mountaineer and Patagonia outdoor company founder Yvon Chouinard on October 19, 2005. With this reporter also in attendance at UCSB's Campbell Hall, Chouinard gave an inspiring talk about the importance of community stewardship and giving back to the place one lives. The theme stuck with the Santa Barbaran and a short time later, he decided to do something about it.

"I had taken a lot of emotional withdrawals from this community, and realized it was time to make some deposits," Gilcrest said.

Through his sobriety, the 45-year-old made a strong commitment to his wife Sara, daughter Kelly (now 12), and son Robbie (9) as well as his own health thanks to the support of family and friends like Doug Ford. The residential building contractor also started getting fit, and later co-founded Blacksmith Endurance Company along with Kevin Steele and Sandra Sanger. Wanting to combine this with his newfound philanthropic philosophy, Gilcrest began holding events like the Santa Barbara Endurance Race, a spring event that includes running distances from 15K to 100 miles and benefits the Los Padres Forest Association.

"Runners love that races share their proceeds with these types of organizations because it is a natural partnership," Gilcrest said.

Having lead trail and ocean paddle races, the director's first foray on local roads is today's half-marathon, an event that starts and finishes in Summerland while going up to the foothills of Montecito in the middle. The first known endurance event in Summerland is more than welcome according to area business owner Dan Van Hirtum. Dan and Janette Van Hirtum's Café Luna, is adjacent to the Lillie Street start/finish line and also played host to the event's pasta feed on Friday night.

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"There hasn't been anything like this before and we would like to change that," Van Hirtum said. "This area lends itself well to outdoor events. We want this area to be more vibrant so it is in our best interest to host things like the half-marathon to open ourselves up to more visitors."

While grateful for the backing of the Summerland Citizens Association, the race director said he relied on the support from Caltrans and members of the Santa Barbara County Public Works office as well as First District Supervisor Salud Carbajal.

"Once people learned it was going to be a benefit, they started falling in line," Gilcrest said. "We just had to find the right beneficiary."

Originally wanting to do something about bicycle safety on local roads, he eventually decided on helping Kidz For A Cure, a non-profit entity started by Lewandowski to aid children with cancer that is affiliated with the Cancer Center of Santa Barbara. Stephanie Carlyle, the Center's development coordinator said all the proceeds donated from the race will go toward pediatric cancer research.

"We are grateful and more than delighted Robert reached out to us to give this opportunity," Carlyle said. "I think it's a great way for athletes and kids help other kids by participating in something that promotes health and well-being."

While the event is a fundraiser, Gilcrest also said that it is also a competitive event with a majority of the runners coming from places over 100-miles away and over half of the entrants being women-the latter prompting him to joke that the challenging hills of the first half of the 13.1-mile distance may have scared some of the menfolk off. Local runner Becky Glusac said that the different course was appealing. Glusac, a former UCSB sprint swimmer who has transformed herself into a Boston Marathon qualifying runner, said that she looks forward to the change of terrain.

"I am really training hard for the Santa Barbara Half (Marathon in November)," the physician's assistant said. "While a race like this won't give someone a (personal record), it is something that gives runners a variety from their usual runs. Preparing for this race altered my training considerably and for the better. Plus, it's great to take part in a first-time event that helps others. I'm glad that the organizers started this race."

While this may be true for her and most of today's participants, they probably are not half as happy as Gilcrest and his family.

"Doing and putting these things on have changed my focus and have given me something that not everybody gets, a second chance on life," Gilcrest said. "Thanks to Yvon Chouinard, that has become my medicine."