

Huge effort to the finish line for third time Boston Marathon runner from Chinook's Edge

Willa Wanke hit her first of many roadblocks before she even started heading down to the prestigious Boston Marathon. The Grade 1 teacher from Jessie Duncan School in Penhold was still recovering from orthopedic knee surgery and was wavering on whether or not to even travel to Boston. In the end, she decided she would walk half the marathon and run the other with the goal of simply finishing.

Then she forgot her shoes in her car when she arrived at the Calgary airport the day before the event, and had time to only tie them onto her carry-on backpack before boarding the plane for the connector flight in Toronto – a city in the midst of a massive ice storm. She landed at 6:00 a.m. and began a different kind of marathon, as a number of flights were delayed and ultimately canceled throughout the next 12 hours.

Early into the delay, a runner from Vancouver named Lisa Dinh noticed the shoes tied onto Willa's backpack and struck up a conversation. It was Lisa's first Boston Marathon and she was frantic to join her husband and family who had already arrived in Boston. Willa watched as Lisa's hopes were raised and then dashed as each plane was canceled, and became determined to find a way to get the young woman to her first 'Boston'.

Soon two other stranded travelers got involved, as they were residents of Boston who were scheduled to volunteer at the Marathon – which was now only hours away. The four decided to join together and rent a vehicle, Willa taking turns driving with one of the volunteers while Lisa slept in the backseat.

"We were all determined to get her down there – it became everyone's quest," Willa said. "We were getting awfully close to the start of the marathon, and still facing an 8.5 hour drive through some pretty treacherous road conditions in the middle of the night. But people really took us under their wing and did everything they could to help. When we finally crossed the border and were on the last stretch, we stopped at a burger place because we hadn't even eaten. I mean, there are really specific things you do to prepare for a marathon – and driving all night and eating french fries is not one of them!"

Nonetheless, the four pulled into the city just in time. Lisa's family was waiting, frantic to get her dressed and organized with her runner's bib and on her way to the start. Willa was in a later group and dashed onto the last bus that was taking runners to the starting line.

"I hadn't eaten, hadn't slept, and the weather conditions were the worst combination of cold, driving rain and wind gusts. But it was my favourite Boston Marathon!" said Willa. "There were so many places it could have gone sideways, but I think it was meant to happen exactly the way it did. Four strangers stranded in a winter storm, and we found a way forward because of the effort of so many people around us. It wasn't about the run this time, it was about helping someone else fulfill their dream. It was full of heart."



It was a dark and stormy night when Willa and Lisa met at the Toronto Airport, waiting for their connecting flight to the Boston Marathon. They both eventually finished the marathon successfully, and their story caught the attention of media - several mentions of their triumph were carried even before the marathon was done!

Administrative Professionals Day - April 25
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