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runPossible volunteers aim to change the lives of those in need by pairing up for weekly exercise

by [Melissa Chipman \(http://insiderlouisville.com/?author=177\)](http://insiderlouisville.com/?author=177)



<http://insiderlouisville.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/runpossible.jpg?ff3236>) Medical research has incontrovertibly linked regular, vigorous exercise to mental well-being. Recently, recovery and community-assistance programs have begun to embrace the use of exercise as a component of treatment and counseling.

runPossible is one such program that was launched earlier this month. In partnership with Wayside Christian Mission and St. Vincent de Paul, runPossible pairs volunteers with people who are homeless, in recovery, or in some way disadvantaged for weekly walks or runs in Louisville.

runPossible is an initiative of Sweaty Sheep, a Presbyterian running church. (There is a very long explanation of [how this running club is technically a church \(http://www.sweatysheep.com/who-we-are\)](http://www.sweatysheep.com/who-we-are) on their website.) Ryan Althaus was a student at the Presbyterian Seminary when he founded Sweaty Sheep.

One of the annual Sweaty Sheep events is the Merry Christmas 5K,

a fun run on the waterfront where runners stop for (non-spiked) egg nog every kilometer. For this run, the team invited the homeless to participate and hooked participants up with donated running shoes and clothes.

The idea for runPossible

(<http://www.runpossible.sweatysheep.com/>) came out of last year's 5K. "It's fine to do one day of service a year. We want to turn that into a long-term commitment," says Alex Becker, pastor of Henryville Community Presbyterian Church and Mount Lebanon Presbyterian Church in Henryville, Ind. Becker is one of the organizers of runPossible.

So the Sweaty Sheep reached out to Wayside Christian Mission and St. Vincent de Paul. The conversations started in January, and on May 7, around 20 homeless and disadvantaged people — mostly women — and around the same number of volunteers gathered at Hotel Louisville at 6 a.m. for an hour long walk/run.

The goal is always have a one-to-one ratio of volunteers to participants in the program because the real meaningfulness of the weekly event isn't in the running as much as it is in the relationships you forge. "We're looking for people to carve out an hour of your week to make that commitment," says Becker. "You matter to someone else. We're here to save each other."

Matt Fillipps is a consumer experience consultant at Humana and has attended all three runs as a volunteer. The past two runs he's paired up with a young man named Tyler. It turned out they wore the same size shoes, so Fillipps gave Tyler a pair of his gently used running shoes so Tyler didn't have to run in basketball sneakers. He credits Tyler with giving him the reason to get up for a 6 a.m. run on a Wednesday.

"Running is usually such an individual sport," says Fillipps. You're usually competing against yourself, trying to achieve a personal best. But these 1.5 – 2.5 mile runs are more about running for the other person, he says.

"Any exercise, when done with enough vigor and for long enough helps reduce stress and fuels the brain with chemicals that create a sense of well-being even after the sweating is done," says Michael Lehman, a researcher at the Laboratory of Cellular and Molecular Research at the National Institutes of Health in a Washington Post article (http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/running-can-help-the-homeless-and-others-turn-their-lives-around/2013/05/24/31a50aea-9006-11e2-9abd-e4c5c9dc5e90_story.html).

“But few activities are as inexpensive and easy to do as running.”

The runPossible [website](#)

(<http://www.runpossible.sweatysheep.com/>) says:

runPossible doesn't turn people into great runners, it starts a self-transformation process, initiated by physical movement, that aids in the development of life changing friendships and self-confidence.

When asked how integral religion was to the running group, Becker described it as the foundation that the groups come from. “We never go around ‘swinging the sword of scripture,’” he says, describing it as an inclusive community. “We’re not there to proselytize.”

Ken Combs Running Store, Blue Mile and Fleet Feet have all been supportive of runPossible. Fleet Feet is accepting donations of gently used or new running gear on behalf of the program.

runPossible meets every Wednesday morning from 6 to 7 a.m. at Wayside Christian Mission’s Hotel Louisville on Broadway at Second Street. In case of inclement weather, they will do indoor exercises. Follow along on their [Facebook page](#) (https://www.facebook.com/runpossibleLOUISVILLE?ref=br_tf) for updates and additional events.

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