HEALTH $\cdot D\beta = 1$ CHEROKEE PHOENIX • SEPTEMBER 2007



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Cherokee citizen Marcella Morton receives the "Steps Community Heroes Award" from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. (Submitted photo)

Promise motivates woman to better health and award

By JoKay Dowell Staff Writer

WESTVILLE, Okla. - When Marcella Morton's best friend was dying from cancer, she asked Morton to promise to improve her health. Morton agreed, but like many people she put that promise out of mind. After her friend died, Morton said a voice reminded her of the promise and has been motivating her since, from walking to running the Boston Marathon, and recently receiving a national health award.

"I was like most people. I ate too much of the wrong foods, watched too much television and rarely, if ever, exercised," Morton said. "All those horrible things that people do to their bodies, I did."

Then Morton visited her best friend who was dying from breast cancer.

"She sat me down and she said 'I want you to make me a promise. I want you to do something about your health," Morton said.

Morton "pinkyswore" to improve her health. Two weeks later at age

start to exercise your body doesn't crave the bad stuff," she said.

From there Morton graduated to 10K races. "I found out it was something that is very easy to do. It helped me to lose a lot of weight, improved my health, so I decided I was going to start running a little longer distance."

She ran her first Tulsa Run (a 15K race) in 1999 and began setting her goal higher.

In 2003, she qualified for the Boston Marathon with 3 minutes to spare. According to the Web site, qualifying times are based on a runner's age at the time of the marathon, which is held every April. For example, a woman who is 45 to 49 years old must be able to complete the 26.2 miles in 4 hours.

Though she doesn't hear her friend's voice anymore, Morton still talks to her at times when she pushes herself to unexpected accom-

plishments.

"She is a really "One night I was standing at great role model the kitchen sink washing for our young Cherokee women dishes and this voice said 'You as she shows that promised.' I know it was in my being healthy and fit is about more head but it was just like it was than the way you look, but it is the her. And I thought 'Oh my way you live. She gosh, she's not going to forget is an amazingly strong Cherokee woman," said Lisa Pivec, director of - Marcella Morton Cherokee Nation

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Morton, a Cherokee citizen, went on with her life with the promise buried in grief.

this."

"One night I was standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes and this voice said 'You promised.' I know it was in my head, but it was just like it was her," Morton said. "And I thought 'Oh my gosh, she's not going to forget this. She's telling me 'You promised me.""

So Morton, weighing 200 pounds at the time, finished the dishes and put on some tennis shoes.

"I put those shoes on and walked 15 minutes and thought 'Hey, that's good, that's a start."

Every afternoon she put on her tennis shoes and walked, each time pushing a little farther. Soon 15 minutes became 20, 25, then 30 minutes. As the weather cooled, Morton sped up her walks to cover her increasing distance faster and return to her warm house sooner.

"That's when I began to try to run, and it was extremely hard because I was still overweight and I hadn't exerted myself in a long time," Morton recalled. "My lungs were searing, But I just kept adding a little more, thinking I'll make it to the next pine tree, I'll make it to the next fence post, and pretty soon I could run all the way to the end of my lane and back."

By spring of 1998, almost a year after her friend's death, Morton decided to run a 5K (3.1 miles) race.

"They shot the gun and I'm thinking, 'I told my family I could do this under 30 minutes and I think I'm going to die."

She crossed the finish line in 29 minutes, 42 seconds, while placing second in her age group.

"That was my first race and I liked that adrenalin. And, that was a way for me to keep that promise to my friend because when you

Community Health. "Marcella is the type of leader we need for our Cherokee youth in our educational and community systems, one that displays her values to students by the way she lives her life and her accomplishments."

A major accomplishment for Morton came in June when she accepted the "Steps Community Heroes Award" from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, which honors individuals who have made contributions to improve the health and well-being of others in their communities. The timing of the presentation was especially bittersweet.

"It was really incredible because the very day that I accepted the award in Seattle was 10 years on that very day that she passed away. I walked up to that podium and I was like 'This is yours. I'm here because of you," Morton said of her friend. "Whenever I got to the point that -I felt I just couldn't give it any more she's lifted me up a lot of times. It's her spirit and I know that. That award was not just for me, it was for her too, and what she instilled in me."

Retired from a 28-year teaching career, Morton has lost about 60 pounds and is a lifetime member of Weight Watchers. Though she has arthritis and has undergone surgery on both knees, she still works as an education specialist in the Education Talent Search program of the American Indian Resource Center in Tahlequah, Okla. At 56 years old, she still runs and does strength training.

"I went literally from a couch potato to a -Boston Marathon runner. I think about it now and I can't believe I did that. It's my life and I love it. It's never too late to start taking care of yourself."

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Marcella Morton runs in front of the Tulsa Eye Clinic. (Submitted photo)