

The Arctic Sounder

Northwest Arctic and the North Slope



Barrow runner brings diabetes awareness to finish line

TAMAR BEN-YOSEF

January 29, 2009 at 10:07AM AKST

Every year, as Dec. 31 approaches, people around the world tend to make resolutions. Many vow to get in shape and some promise to do something good for others. For a Barrow man, resolving to do one or the other was not enough. He committed to both, and accomplished his goals before the first month of 2009 was over.

Mansour Alzaharna, known to his neighbors in Barrow as the deli and food court manager at the local Alaska Commercial store, crossed the finish line of his first marathon ever earlier this month. In doing so, Alzaharna and his sponsors made a \$12,000 donation to the American Diabetes Association — \$10,000 more than what was required to run the race.

Every year, Northwest Company, the parent company of AC stores in Alaska, sends Team Diabetes to run along with thousands of others in the Walt Disney World Marathon, which benefits various causes as participants jog through the four Disney theme parks in Orlando, Fla. This is the first year the American Diabetes Association in Alaska was represented in the race, according to Phoebe O'Connell, who works for the association's Alaska chapter.

"In Alaska there are 66,800 people who have diabetes and approximately 22,000 do not even know it," O'Connell said. "Diabetes is a disease with no cure, yet. The complications of diabetes are serious and deadly, including blindness, amputations, heart disease and stroke."

Running in the Middle East

Alzaharna has always been a runner. As a teen living in the middle eastern nation of Jordan, he used to train regularly. Ever since moving to Barrow, he has participated in local five- and nine-mile races.

Knowing that Barrow has its share of people with diabetes, Alzaharna saw the marathon as a way to help when the memo from Northwest Company about the race came his way.

"I did it for the people in Barrow. I have no history of diabetes in my family. I just like to be involved helping the community," Alzaharna said.

Alzaharna had a choice between running the half marathon or the full 26.2 miles. Despite having never run such a long distance, he chose the longer distance.

For three months, starting in October, Alzaharna trained in Barrow according to a training booklet sent out by Northwest.

As long as temperatures stayed 10 degrees above zero, Alzaharna trained outside, in the snow. But when temperatures began to drop, he stepped inside to a treadmill.

"The key to training on the treadmill is to take your mind off the running," Alzaharna said. "I watched people playing basketball."

Sometimes he used his iPod to listen to music as he ran, but that didn't turn out as planned. The music pumped him up to a pace that was too fast to maintain safely, he said, like the time he was watching "Mama Mia" as he ran.

"I got motivated but ended up in a big ouch," he said.

To maintain his weight and a healthy diet while training, Alzaharna stuck to his version of a carb-rich diet. Every day he drank low-fat chocolate milk and ate a yam or sweet potato for breakfast. Sodas and fried food were out of the question.

Training and dieting were only part of the challenging process of preparing for the race. In order to participate, Alzaharna had to raise \$2,000 in donations for diabetes education and research.

With the help of friends and the community, Alzaharna raised six times that amount. He sent letters to local businesses and spread the word about his participation. He also set up a table at AC and with the help of Angela Valdez, a local nurse, and her daughter Monika, he gave away healthy food donated by the store and educated passers-by about diabetes by handing out fliers and cookbooks and soliciting donations.

The community responded. Some people with the disease even came up to Alzaharna and said they wish they could run the race with him, he said. Donations came in from individuals, companies and local government.

"I couldn't have done it without the community," Alzaharna said. "I thank them for supporting the fundraiser."

"The American Diabetes Association is so grateful to Mansour and the other runners who are really making a difference in the lives of Alaskans who have diabetes," O'Connell said. Alzaharna finished the marathon in 3 hours, 51 minutes and placed 1,476 out of 14,950 people who crossed the finish line.

Despite having never run more than 20 miles at a time, even while training, the first-time marathon runner said he never hit that wall or breaking point. The crowds, the music and friends cheering him on kept him going, enjoying the beautiful 60-degree day in Florida.

Training in the hot gym in Barrow made the almost 100-degree temperature difference much easier to handle, Alzaharna said. "The feeling was incredible," he said. "But half an hour later I was sore."