

READY TO GO THE DISTANCE

Students from 3 schools right on course as they prepare for the run of their lives

BY TINA AKOURIS

takouris@suntimes.com

Jose Hernandez didn't just learn how to train for a marathon when he joined Team M3 in his senior year at Foreman. He learned a lot more.

"They gave me the idea that a marathon is a lot like life," said Hernandez, 20, now a student at Northeastern Illinois University. "There are times when you want to give up, but once you get through it, you are so happy and overwhelmed. It could also relate to something that has to do with school or something small in your life. That gave me a huge boost of confidence."

Team M3 is an organization comprised of students from Foreman, Carver and North Grand that eventually will participate in either a half-marathon or full marathon. The Bank of America Chicago Marathon is scheduled for Oct. 12, and 68 Team M3 runners will participate.

Cathy Braund, program director for Team M3, said the MGR Foundation, a not-for-profit group, is the driving force behind Team M3. Braund said MGR wants to have a minimum of 15 schools involved in Team M3 next year.

During the summer, Braund said, Nike donated shoes and running clothes and brought Team M3 in for a tour of its Chicago corporate offices.

From helpers to competitors

In 2005, MGR had Foreman students volunteer at the Chicago Marathon, passing out water to runners. But some students wanted to compete in a marathon instead of just handing out water, and the first Team M3 began training in 2006.

"We wanted to see if this is something that we could do, and we wanted to make sure that [teenagers running a marathon] was a healthy thing," Braund said.

The first year, there were 11 students who signed up. Braund said marathon runners have to be over 16, but students between the ages of 14 and 18 can join Team M3.

"A lot of our kids are not involved in organized sports," Braund said. "Our program is open to everybody. We have kids who are outside the sports bubble at their schools, who never thought they would be good enough in sports. With this train-

ing, maybe they're not the fastest, but they do enjoy themselves."

Yessenia Marrufo is a Foreman senior who plays soccer. She joined Team M3 because she thought it would be a good experience and she never had run more than three miles. She also praised the team's social aspect.

"I also use it to prepare for my spring soccer season," Marrufo said. "I met new people and became more sociable. And now I feel great about myself. I didn't think I could run more than three miles, but now I can run 20 miles in a week."

Runners paired with adults

Mentoring is an integral part of Team M3. Every student is paired with an adult, and they run together at Montrose Harbor during the group's training season from May to the marathon.

During the offseason, November through April, students and mentors go swimming, play volleyball or go bowling. There were 20 mentors in the first year of the program and 43 this year.

"I still felt like a student, but I wanted to take responsibility for something," Hernandez said. "I wanted to make them feel like they could finish the marathon, and this made me feel like an adult."

Hernandez was one of the first Foreman students who handed out water during that 2005 marathon. He knew then that trying to run a marathon would be an "amazing experience." Even when Hernandez's mentor told him he couldn't finish the marathon, it made him try even harder.

"I wanted to prove him wrong," Hernandez said. "But I was also out of shape, and I wanted to run the marathon because I had an ego. I trained hard, too hard, and got hurt. But I ran it in 6 hours, 17 minutes. It wasn't such a great finish, but I cared about the completion."

Marrufo plans to run the marathon next month.

"I'm planning on doing that because it's going to be fun," she said. "I would tell people that [Team M3] is the best thing you can do in life."

Hernandez likes seeing the reaction of people when he tells them that he ran a marathon.

"When I tell them, I get raised eyebrows," he said. "[Marathon running] shows that you have great qualities about yourself."