

# MCRRC Intervals

November 2020

Newsletter of the *montgomery county road runners club*

## MCRRC Members Tackle Virtual Racing



Photo: Lucy Slovon

Wendy Gillick, Lucy Slovon, and Ashish Gupta celebrate their Great Virtual Race Across Tennessee 1000K finishes



Photo: Lynne Yao

Lynne Yao (front), Rainell Miller, Summer Half Program coach Sheila Patel, and Seema Shankar share a selfie moment during their virtual Parks Half Marathon



Photo: Ivan Cheung

Conroy Zien and Mimi Zaw-Pham relax before running their first Boston Marathon

### Board Meetings

Board Meetings are held on the second Thursday of each month.



# Shifting Gears

by Amy Lin

One thing that has impressed me throughout the pandemic is how MCRRC members have overcome and even embraced the difficulties of an unexpected shakeup in their fitness routines. Motivation has been paramount, with runners and walkers signing up for virtual races or long-term distance challenges to have goals to work toward.

Our virtual low-key race series totaled 965 registrations over its ten races, and this year's virtual incarnation of the Parks Half Marathon attracted nearly 650 participants. More than fifty Club members completed the summer-long Great Virtual Race Across Tennessee 1000K, created by Lazarus Lake of Barkley Marathons fame.

A number of runners in our summer training programs have finished or continue to train for virtual races normally held all over the world, taking advantage of social media sites and online hangouts to help create the sense of community and accountability they miss from not being able to meet in person.

Some members have chosen to step back from racing, instead using the downtime to experiment with different training strategies, cross-training, nutrition, or gear. Best of all, many of us have rediscovered the joy of running for the sake of running.

This issue of Intervals speaks to how MCRRC has adapted to what 2020 has wrought. Scott Brown offers greetings and thanks from his new digs, Brian Murphy provides notes on the MCRRC town hall meeting held in September, and Jefferson Lunsford and Yvette Murphy share the goals and progress of the Club's Inclusion and Equity Committee.

Next, Conroy Zien details the challenges of reconfiguring MCRRC training programs to a virtual format. For our Runner Profile, Lisa Levin interviews Vilma Najera, an assistant principal at Quince Orchard High

School when not running (and sometimes even when she is). Last but not least, AJ Trulock recaps the Club's first in-person race since the pandemic lockdown, a hopeful sign of more events to come.

*A note on the annual awards listed in the September issue: Because the Club was unable to present awards with the usual pageantry, details on the major award recipients will soon be posted on the MCRRC website, [www.mcrrc.org](http://www.mcrrc.org).*

## Saying Farewell for Now

by Scott Brown

As you may have noticed in the September issue, I have handed in my proverbial red pen as editor of Intervals. I am delighted that Amy Lin agreed to take over, and I'm confident the newsletter is in good hands going forward.

Even though I've stepped down and moved to Prague for three years, I didn't want to leave without conveying my appreciation to MCRRC for the opportunity to serve you as editor for six-plus years.

I've long said that editing Intervals is the best volunteer position in MCRRC because it's about the only one you can do entirely from the comfort of your couch. (I kid: sometimes I edited issues from a desk.) But without doubt, the best part of the gig has been getting to work with and learn about so many of the great people who make the Club run.

First and foremost, I want to thank the stable of regular Intervals contributors, including Lisa Levin, Dan DiFonzo, and the late George Tarrico. You stepped up time and again to provide the foundation of Intervals. Thanks as well to Karen Kincer, Don Shulman, Mike Acuña, and Ken Earley,

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**Have comments or questions? Or want to help?**  
Contact us at [Intervals@mcrrc.org](mailto:Intervals@mcrrc.org).

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Intervals is published bimonthly by the Montgomery County Road Runners, P.O. Box 1703, Rockville MD 20849.

MCRRC is a non-profit, educational organization which promotes personal health and fitness through the sport of running. The club conducts regular running activities, including training sessions races, seminars, and social events.



# MCRRC Hosts Virtual Town Hall

by Brian Murphy

On Thursday, September 24, MCCRC President Ken Earley called a special meeting, which the board held virtually over Zoom. It's interesting to look at the Club's founding documents to understand what a special meeting is. According to section 5 of our constitution and bylaws, "Special Meetings may be called by the President, by petition to the President in writing and signed by three members of the Board of Directors, or by petition to the President in writing and signed by ten club members age 18 or over. The written petition must list the subject or subjects of the meetings and the rationale for calling a Special Meeting. At a Special Meeting the discussion can only pertain to the subjects for which the meeting was called."

This special, town-hall style meeting was called to address the Club's standing regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has changed everything about normal life, and MCRRC is no exception. As runners, we know that there's not a lot to running. You get your shoes on, and you head out the door. As members of MCRRC, we know there's more to it than that—especially the social aspect of it. This was the most disruptive part of the pandemic. We are a very social club. From races to programs to weekly workouts, everything we do is with our running friends at our side.

Ken and the rest of the board understood that the Club's members deserved to hear from the board on how MCRRC was faring and what to expect in the coming months. The meeting began with discussion about the current outlook for returning to normal programming and how decisions were made over the past year. In general, Club decisions ultimately fall to the MCRRC board of directors. However, nearly all the decisions from the start of the pandemic have been made for us by state and local

government restrictions. Throughout these restrictions, the Club got creative in how to offer our membership value. Our amazing volunteer coaches got together to create several virtual summer and fall training programs. The Racing Committee worked out a fun way to use the Club's great low-key race courses for unique virtual races.

We also started to look ahead. The Racing Committee has been meeting to draw up what racing will look like in the coming months. Those that remember racing in the 1980s might see some familiar aspects—no frills, staggered starts, no water stops, no post-race food, masks in appropriate spots, no extended congregating. All of this is being done in partnership with our race directors.

We're also looking at what can be done with our programs. We're taking what went well with our summer and fall programs, what could be done better, and figuring out how to apply it moving forward. It's important to note that we're doing this while we still adhere to county requirements on meeting in groups.

Later in the meeting, Don Shulman announced the 2020 Capital Campaign. This is an effort kicked off by four of the Club's past presidents – Jean Arthur, Karen Kincer, Don Shulman and Mike Acuña. Like many others in this environment, the Club has had to endure decreased revenue, as Treasurer Jennifer Smith highlighted. MCRRC is using this time to reinvent itself and retool its systems, races, and programs to prepare for the new normal of group running and competitive racing. Knowing this, these Club leaders have launched a campaign to help.

At-Large board members Yvette G. Murphy and Jefferson Lunsford also discussed the Inclusion and Equity Committee (further details on page 5 of this issue). This summer, the group established a core group of committed volunteers to explore



diversity issues within MCRRC. The group has three strategy area subgroups: Communications and Outreach, Leadership Transparency and Accountability, and Training Programs and Races. The subgroups have been hard at work to elevate the MCRRC membership experience.

Prior to adjourning, the full board took time to answer additional questions by the members who attended live. Full video of the Zoom event is posted on our website: <https://mcrrc.org/mcrrc-virtual-town-hall-2020/>

—Brian Murphy is the secretary of MCRRC and a member of the Competitive Racing Team.

## Farewell

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MCRRC presidents past and present, who gave me complete latitude to run Intervals as I saw fit.

I also want to thank the crew behind the scenes whose work makes Intervals possible. My deepest appreciation to our eagle-eyed managing editor, Freddi Carlip, our layout whiz, Bob DiIorio, and our operations director, Ashley Zuraf.

More than anything, I want to say thanks to all the MCRRC members whose stories I've gotten to know on these pages, or all those who've had a kind word to say about reading Intervals. I'll miss being known as "the guy from the newsletter."

I look forward to returning to MCRRC training programs and races in three years, and to keeping up with Club happenings in these pages. In the meantime, drop me a line if you're planning to visit Prague and want to get in a few miles.

—Scott Brown has been an MCRRC member since 2011. He is in the Foreign Service currently posted to Prague.



# Virtual Training Programs in the Time of COVID-19

by Conroy Zien

This year started out about as normally as any other year. Hundreds of runners gathered at the Manna Food Center in Gaithersburg for MCRRC's New Year's Day 5K, eager to start a new year of running and racing. The usual buzz and excitement of a new running year filled the air. Little did we know back in January that not only running but entire lives were about to change.

Two and a half months later, a new word was introduced into the vernacular of everyone in the world: COVID-19 (a.k.a. SARS-CoV-2, Coronavirus). In March, as the virus was on its way to creating a global pandemic, the MCRRC Board of Directors decided to suspend all Club activity for several months. Additionally, the board considered how to migrate its spring and summer training programs into a virtual format, something that had never been done before. Program directors unanimously agreed that having training programs would provide Club members with a necessary outlet during such uncertain and challenging times. MCRRC decided to offer these programs free of charge to Club members, and directors were given the leeway to modify their programs to a virtual format.

As program directors, we begin planning the spring and summer training seasons shortly after the beginning of the new year. We were all far into our preparations for the coming season — volunteer pace group coaches had been lined up, schedules had been created, track workouts had been planned — when we had to switch everything to a virtual design. Nevertheless, we all remained committed to our programs and were willing to do whatever was necessary to proceed in a virtual format. As Summer Half-Marathon Program director Larry Feidelseit said, "We needed to foster the sense of community that's a hallmark of our club."

In our First Time Marathon (FTM) Program, registration was still quite strong, despite the virtual format. We decided to increase the use of digital communication methods, including the Club's new communication platform as well as virtual meeting tools such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc. FTM orientation, normally held in person a week or two before the start of the season, was switched to a Zoom meeting this year. Pace groups and coaches were assigned as usual, and each pace coach

was committed to building camaraderie by holding regular virtual group meetings throughout the season.

For each pace group we also created a Strava group, which was voluntary for participants but would provide a nice tool for coaches to monitor progress throughout the season. All program directors agreed that we wouldn't be holding any in-person group training runs. This presented us with a whole host of new challenges.

## Keeping Runners Motivated and Engaged

Since we wouldn't be meeting in person, keeping our runners motivated was a major concern. At the beginning of the summer, many races had not yet been canceled, so

However, virtual group meetings had some unexpected benefits. Under normal circumstances, we occasionally have guest speakers meet with our runners, to provide valuable training tips, etc. Speaking time was usually limited to a few minutes before a group run. This season, we could schedule a guest speaker for a longer time period via a virtual meeting. Previously, we may have had up to five guests speak to our group in one training session; this year, we more than doubled that number. Speakers included current Club members, program directors, race directors, coaches, medical professionals, and professional triathletes. The flexibility of virtual scheduling enabled us to expand our list of speakers and allowed us to include guests who are not even local to the area. These speakers proved to be exceedingly popular with our runners, and the virtual format has worked so well that I plan on incorporating it in subsequent seasons, post-pandemic.

Weekly email communication with the group was also extremely important to keep runners motivated and focused on their training. What would usually be shared with our runners in person, before or after a group workout, was now included in any emails to the group. Connie and Vicky have adopted similar strategies when communicating with their runners in the 10K Program. They stressed the importance of sharing thoughtful information directly with the group; knowledge that would normally be picked up organically by running with coaches now needed to be conveyed directly to the runners.

None of us wanted to have our lives and training seasons upended, but we've all managed to successfully adapt and adjust. Many runners have already finished their virtual goal races; some have even been able to participate in smaller actual in-person races, and others will be completing their virtual races soon. While I hope this will be the only season we'll have to train virtually, I believe the lessons we've learned during this process will help us improve our runners' experiences in the future. If nothing else, we've all developed a new appreciation of how rewarding it is to run and train in a group!

— Conroy Zien joined MCRRC in 2007 and has been directing FTM since 2012.



Photo: Yesenia F. Diaz

Yamir Diaz-Castillo, Lily Burch, Corine Lopez, Elizabeth Lindahl, Connie Benskin Corbett, Vicky Nathan, and Travisha Gunter pose at the finish of their virtual Marine Corps Marathon

the carrot of a race still served to motivate runners. Gathering folks who are all in pursuit of a common goal is important in building a sense of community, and weekly program-wide Zoom calls presented the opportunity to still "meet" as a group. Unfortunately, as more races were canceled or switched to a virtual format, participation in these group meetings declined, and I could sense enthusiasm and motivation beginning to wane. Both Larry's program as well as Connie Corbett and Vicky Nathan's 10K program had similar experiences.

# Finding Our Stride Together — A Commitment to Inclusion and Equity

by Yvette G. Murphy and Jefferson Lunsford

Until the Inclusion and Equity Committee (I&E) launched at the beginning of June, MCRRC had never intentionally addressed issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Having a group focused on building a culture of inclusion and equity across all areas of the Club could only be a good step forward. However, like beginning runners, we stumbled. Some of us were unintentionally hurt as we tried to define the group's relationship within MCRRC, identify DEI issues within the Club, and develop actionable changes. With the urgency of the pandemic that has disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and the high-profile murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and too many others, it felt as if I&E was in a full sprint to ensure MCRRC was doing its part to commit to being more inclusive and equitable and, in particular, to center the needs of its BIPOC members. As beginners do, though, we went out too fast and eventually hit a wall... or several.

Over the last five months, we've learned that the cultural and systemic changes that need to happen across the Club's various operations will take time and a high level of commitment from its members and leaders. The collective volunteer hours alone of I&E members are an indicator of progress and emerging leadership that will undoubtedly have a long-term impact on MCRRC and the broader community. I&E members demonstrate deeper commitment with their willingness to listen to each other, share stories, make mistakes, help each other learn, and, ultimately, be vulnerable. In order to address difficult issues such as structural and systemic racism, we must understand that change starts with individuals willing to work on themselves and to meet others where they are. Stumbling and making mistakes are a necessary part

of the Club's growth toward becoming more inclusive and equitable, but with patience and empathy, we'll find our stride together.

The strength of the I&E Committee is the community of members who have very different backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives, yet meet every other week to charter a path for change. We have a lot of work to do, and our journey will benefit from the unique stories that bring us together and shape our running lives. A few I&E members have agreed to share their perspectives on diversity, equity, and inclusion within the Club and what they hope to see:

*I joined I&E because I think that growing the participation of people of color in the running community will benefit everyone. Joining MCRRC changed my life. I was taught and inspired by so many people, and I enjoy the warm friendships and personal, non-work relationships with people of different backgrounds. As the Club continues to become more diverse, I think that the chances will grow that other black and brown people who are in need of improved health and motivation will see a place for themselves and enjoy the benefits of involvement. We must continue the outreach to people of all races, income levels, and education levels, and use running as a bridge between us.*

—Kirk Holmes, MCRRC member since 2014

*In honor of the service of George Tarrico, I volunteered for I&E this summer. I can't do six jobs like George did for MCRRC, but at least I can do one. Runner safety is a top priority for me, and the death of Ahmaud Arbery, while he was jogging in Georgia in February, felt personal. I don't know how to help our BIPOC runners feel safer while running in Montgomery County,*

*but I want to be part of a running community that is willing to explore solutions for runner safety and how we can help each other as a community. I love the freedom of running — me, my shoes, the road — and I want to work towards all runners having the freedom to run and feel safe.*

—Mary Tyszkiewicz, MCRRC member since 2018

*One of the scariest moments of my running career was not on the track or the trail, but when I was pulled over after a Speed Development workout, for a broken headlight. Luckily, the officer that pulled me over was very professional and courteous and I made it home to my family. This was not the case for George Floyd, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Jacob Blake, Breonna Taylor, and countless others. I should not have felt "lucky" to have made it home after a routine traffic stop. However, this is the reality for African Americans like me and many people of color in America.*

*We pride ourselves on being a place for every pace. Equity and inclusion are part of the fabric that makes MCRRC. As one of the largest running clubs in the nation, it is imperative that we strive for equality in our community. The killing of Ahmaud Arbery is a reminder that for people of color, even running presents unique perils. We cannot wait. The fight for equality has no sideline. If we are a flagship running club, we must take a stand. MCRRC races and training programs have been a respite and a place of comfort for me. They have granted me a previously elusive love of running. I look forward to working with I&E to improve MCRRC, and hope to do a little to facilitate systemic changes in our society.*

—Ryan Lipford, MCRRC member since 2014

For more information on the Inclusion and Equity Committee, please contact [diversity@mcrrc.org](mailto:diversity@mcrrc.org).

# Vilma Najera



by Lisa Levin

*A member of MCRRC for a decade, Vilma Najera did not start running until age thirty, at the encouragement of friends who would meet at the track at Montgomery Blair High School. The first time she ran four laps around that track, Vilma was hooked and subsequently joined the MCRRC 10K Program. Within a year, she had completed the Half Marathon Program, signed up for the First Time Marathon (FTM) Program, and finished the 2011 Marine Corps Marathon in 4:44. By 2014, Vilma had taken more than an hour off that time to qualify for the Boston Marathon. Vilma qualified for Boston again this year, but training took a back seat to the pandemic, particularly as her position as an assistant principal at Quince Orchard High School demanded her full attention. Vilma is the co-coordinator of the Minority Scholars Program, and she was also occupied with the racial and social injustice issues magnified by current events. With all of these stressors taking priority over training, Vilma had all but written off the virtual Boston Marathon, but at the last minute she was inspired by her MCRRC runner friends to complete this year's Boston journey for her own mental health and self-care.*

## **When and why did you start running?**

I started running to get fit and to stop the aging process. What I did not know was how it would change me mentally and physically, and how I would gain a running family. It is amazing what the body is capable of and how much of running and racing marathons is mental. The feeling of accomplishing personal (quiet) goals

is what keeps me going. The running friends I have made in my ten years in the Club are what motivate me. They are fifty percent of the reason I wake up early in the morning to do my long runs.

## **What do you think was key to improving your marathon time to achieve a BQ?**

I started taking my training more seriously. I started cross-training and was more focused on my goal.



Photo: Vilma Najera

Vilma Najera

## **What do you remember most about your first Boston Marathon?**

It was cold and raining, but aside from the experience of the marathon itself, what I truly remember is how my family came together and drove up to support me. It was the first time in a long time that my family was united and happy.

## **How did the pandemic affect your training for this year's Boston Marathon?**

The pandemic affected my training

tremendously. I did not realize how much the stress of the pandemic, the transition to remote working, the isolation, the social injustice witnessed and all the inequities that the pandemic forced us to see, and not being around my running family and friends would weigh on me. Not having a race and not having my runner support system made it difficult to find the motivation to run. I questioned if I was a "real" runner because I was not out there getting all the miles.

## **Tell us about your virtual Boston Marathon!**

I was not going to run the virtual Boston Marathon. I registered for it, but when the window opened I felt super undertrained and unmotivated to run the marathon. It was not until I saw my runner brother Conroy Zien and runner sister Mimi Zaw-Pham complete their first Boston Marathons (virtually) that I felt inspired. My goal for virtual Boston was never going to be time or a PR, but for just completing the distance in such a trying time.

The day I decided to run the virtual race had to have been the most humid day in September. I ran with my friend Kelly Dunston, and we decided our approach was going to be slow and steady, with the goal of just completing the distance. We decided to make it an adventure. It was the day after a big storm. We started at Needwood, and our turnaround was Ken-Gar. Throughout the trail, we were running through puddles and walking through thick, slippery mud patches. Our runner family met us along the trail, fed us, and cheered us



on. We ended our race at the track at Rockville High School, where our FTM family came out, cheered, ran by our side, and danced with us at the end. Conroy set up an awesome water stop with M&Ms, Gatorade, protein milk, and eighties music blasting for our last miles.

### **What advice do you have for runners planning to run a virtual marathon?**

Stick to your training, listen to your body, fuel correctly, and know you can do it. Your mental game has to be a lot stronger than your physical game.

### **How has training with MCRRC programs, both pre- and during the pandemic, helped you develop as a runner?**

I trust the MCRRC training programs and their coaches. What has helped me is sticking to the program and listening to my coaches. If you follow the program and listen to your coaches, you cannot go wrong.

### **Do you have a favorite race distance? What about that distance appeals to you?**

I enjoy the marathon distance. I like how it helps me mentally. The training is therapeutic for me. It gives me time to stop being “on,” stressing about the job, life, and all of the other things that consume us. The long distances allow me to take a break from my reality and to just be Vilma. The long run also humbles me and reminds that I’m not as “good” as I think I am, but I’m also not as “bad.” It also allows me to listen to my awesome music playlist. I have all the jams!

### **How do you balance training with your demanding job as a high school assistant principal?**

It’s hard to carve out time with my job. My days start early, I am “on” all day, and then most days out of the week I have night duties. My running is normally in the evening or before my night duties. I am fortunate to have a boss that is a runner and gets it! So, it’s not unusual to see me running around my school neighborhood before our football games!

### **You are active in initiatives to address diversity and inclusion, including co-coordinating the Minority Scholars Program, a student-led, student-based, and student-driven program aimed at closing the opportunity gap. What do you think the running**



**Vilma Najera breaks the finish tape for her virtual Boston Marathon, with Sarah Day, Hai Nguyen, and Christina Berube cheering**

### **community does well to promote inclusion, and what do you think we can do better to make it a welcoming place for runners of all backgrounds?**

The Club does a good job offering a variety of different programs to accommodate a range of members. I think an important step the Club can

take to actively promote inclusion is collaborating with diverse racial and ethnic running groups, and supporting/partnering in their events. Similarly, collaborate with neighboring county running clubs. Diversify running routes to use trails outside of Bethesda and Rockville. Support social-justice causes. Helping directors and coaches learn to identify and prevent microaggressions when they happen during group runs or track workouts would also go a long way in promoting inclusion. Here are some good articles on how to effectively promote inclusion:

<https://www.runnersworld.com/news/a32767304/how-to-be-ally-black-running-community-allyship-resources/>

<https://www.runnersworld.com/women/a20847520/hispanic-running-clubs-are-out-to-even-the-odds/>

[https://www.brooksrunning.com/en\\_us/pride/](https://www.brooksrunning.com/en_us/pride/)

<https://www.runnersworld.com/runners-stories/a32973809/international-front-runners-running-clubs/>

### **What are your goals for the rest of 2020?**

I have one more race scheduled for 2020, the Rehoboth Half Marathon. We’ll see if the race will be able to take place. In the meantime, my immediate goals are to remain consistent with my running, keep myself motivated, and be safe out there.

— Lisa Levin is a member of the MCRRC racing team, sponsorship coordinator for the Parks Half Marathon and Pike’s Peek 10K, and an RRCA-certified running coach and co-founder of Run Farther & Faster.

## Germantown 5M Brings Back In-Person Racing for MCRRC

by AJ Trulock

**S**tanding in a starting corral, excitedly waiting for a race to start, is a feeling I've missed in the last several months. As a runner, races are a chance to test myself, see my training come to fruition, and feel the camaraderie of our wonderful club. Unfortunately I have a household full of asthmatics, and surrounding myself with strangers in a start corral has not been a risk I was willing to take. However, when I read through the Germantown 5 Miler COVID procedures, I knew I'd found a race I felt comfortable participating in. When runners arrived at Black Hills Regional Park, individually wrapped packets were laid out and ready to be picked up. Next, the race was not only broken down into small waves, but only two people started at a time (wearing a mask, of course). This allowed enough space between runners to be socially distant, but with runners ahead and behind. The race feeling was there.

The alternative format brought a different way of preparing and racing. Volunteers arrived well before sunrise to mark everything for proper social distancing at packet pickup, runner

staging, and the starting line, and to set out cones and arrow signs to mark the course. Because the Club chose not to have spectators or course marshals,



Photo: Alex Reichmann

**Donna Quackenbush shows Halloween spirit at the Germantown 5 Miler**

runners encouraged one another in true runner fashion as they passed each other on the out-and-back course

from either side of the eight-foot paved trail. Most runners dispersed fairly quickly after the race, to observe social distancing guidelines, especially because there was no post-race smorgasbord to encourage lingering. Without on-course aid stations, runners also had to be more independent during the race, and self-seeding in a small, socially distant wave can be tricky. A few runners who didn't seed themselves correctly found themselves either being passed on course or running without another runner in sight.

Some hiccups can be addressed: for example, there were three queuing lines in the staging area, but only two at the starting line. Overall, the alternative format ran smoothly and felt much more like a race than a virtual event. The key elements were there: an exciting atmosphere, the push from competition, and the feeling of being part of a running community.

—AJ Trulock is a member of the MCRRC Competitive Racing Team and has been with the Club since 2014.