

April 2018 - Jody Neja

The Kilometer Kids mission states that the program aims to “promote an active and healthy lifestyle.” Typically, that refers to program participants, who are anywhere from five to 12 years-old. For Jody Neja, however, that mission trickled up into her entire family’s life, as the 48-year-old went from never running to finishing a 5K nearly every weekend.

Jody’s journey began when her youngest daughter, Millie, a fourth grader at the time at Mountain View Elementary, decided to join the school’s Kilometer Kids program. With the program in need of volunteers, Jody reached out to coach Lisa Kubes about whether there was any room for someone who hadn’t run in decades.

“She basically told me we need all the parent involvement we can get,” said Jody. “She wanted me to just come be supportive of the kids and since I was new to running I could motivate the slower kids. And that worked really well for me because as I was motivating them I felt motivated myself and it just really sparked a desire to start running that I never thought I would feel.”

As she kept volunteering, Jody was inspired by what she saw each time she went to a Kilometer Kids practice.



“I’m a teacher so the best part about it for me was seeing kids from not an educational perspective but from an athletic perspective,” she said. “[It’s exciting to] be able to cheer them on and see them grow, and to see the increase in confidence in the kids who didn’t really have a lot of confidence starting out, including my daughter.

And once Jody started running at practice, she was hooked. That would have been enough of a transformation, but Jody was shocked when her whole family began to catch the running bug.

“My older child was a sixth grader at Hightower Middle School which has a 5K every fall,” she said. “And he said, ‘Since you’re running, I want to do this 5K.’”

Soon, the other children (Jody has six of them) were running with them, going on family runs and doing a 5K each month. The last domino in the Neja family to fall was her husband Tim.

“After about a year my husband was feeling left out,” Jody said. “So he started joining our 5Ks but then he just took it to another level. He said ‘let’s start running a 5K every weekend.’”

So for the last two years, the Nejas have been running a race nearly every weekend. In 2018, they’ve even started making it a goal to travel to races, with the hope of running a race in every state they can manage. The whole family will be taking on the AJC Peachtree Road Race this summer, along with plans to run many of the Grand Prix Series presented by Piedmont Healthcare races.

With that small act of volunteering at Kilometer Kids, the entire Neja family has undergone a distinct change in the last two years. Jody saw the stark difference last Father’s Day, when the family – Instead of having a huge dinner and relaxing – spent the morning running a 5K, then hiking in the afternoon.

“It hasn’t just changed Millie, it hasn’t just changed me,” she said. “It really just changed my whole family.”

