

Published May 10th, 2023

Orindan Patty Hung, 77, completes record-setting 37th straight Boston Marathon

By Jon Kingdon



Cousin Hannah, Grandson Gavin, Partner Don, Co-worker Daphne Barnett (back), Patty Hung, Son David and Cousin Jackie Photo provided

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" is a Chinese proverb that was written around 400 BC. For Orinda resident Patty Hung, her longest journey began in 1987 and concluded April 17, when she finished her 37th consecutive Boston Marathon, a streak that established a new record for women.

Having grown up in Boston, for Hung the Boston Marathon was more than just a race, it was an opportunity to reconnect with her family each year. Which was Hung's favorite Boston Marathon? "The most memorable one would be the first one I ran because I did so well (3 hours, 21 minutes) and all my aunts were there at the 13-mile mark and then met me at the top of Heartbreak Hill, which was really exciting," Hung said. "I was able to stay with the Donnellys who would watch my kids when they were small and later brought them to the races. They were my spiritual leaders."

Even with a top time in that first race, for Hung, it was a long run, but a memorable ending. "It was intimidating, but at the end of the race there was free beer from one of the race's sponsors, so I decided to take a sip of the beer to get myself together and that was the first and last sip of beer I ever had."

The 30th marathon comes a close second for Hung, again with a nod to the importance of family. "In that race, my sons Eric and David ran the race as well," Hung said. "Eric qualified and David got special permission to run, and I had someone run with me for every mile. Hannah Donnelly, the granddaughter of my uncle, who had run five previous marathons with me, ran the first 13 miles with me. When we all finished, my other son Kevin, who did not run because there was a restriction due to the bombing the prior year, joined all of us and we had a wonderful celebration."

It all began when Hung was a single mother with three kids. "I was living in Oakland, near Lake Merritt and I saw people walking and running and I thought I can do this and that's where it started with a three-mile run around the lake," Hung said. "I was looking for a release and wanted to make a mark in going back to Boston and run the marathon. I had the time to focus and relieve stress and it gave me a purpose."

For Hung, the Boston Marathon was a dichotomy from her initial marathons, by figuratively carrying her family with her throughout the race: "It started when I was with my family the day before the race and I went around the room and asked everybody to pick one of the 26 miles and I wrote their name on my wrist band so it was a way to have everyone with me, at least figuratively, making the run more purposeful and it was a tradition I carried on for years."

In preparing for the later marathons, it was the support of her children, Eric, David and Mailee, along with her boyfriend Don Mixon that kept Hung focused. "David and Eric really combed up my training," Hung said. "They were runners themselves and very knowledgeable in marathon training, and were acute in looking at my schedules, making some changes and helping me put it all together. Don did all my workouts with me and the ones that he could not do, he was always there encouraging me and making sure that I would finish well. For this last marathon, I made a schedule again with the help of my children and to make it official, Don helped me to copyright it and I plan to give it away to people who would like to know how I trained."

What should come as no surprise is that the 77-year-old Hung is in peak health. "My doctor can't believe I'm this old and told me that I was breaking all the records for being healthy," Hung said. "She is wonderful and has been very involved, giving me a lot of courage. It's wonderful that I can keep going and show there is always hope for everyone else. I know that there are ailments and diseases that come unexpectedly but if you take care of your health by exercising and eating right, it can help to prevent some of those things from occurring."

Hung's advice to people who want to begin running marathons? "Just enjoy the experience of running a marathon. Joan Benoit, the first women's Olympic champion said, 'How you train is how you race' and I took that to heart. People that don't know what training is about won't train properly which increases the possibility of their getting injured. You can suffer a number of small injuries and aches and pains that can make for a long recuperation which can be easily avoided. You just have to train right to enjoy it."

In simple numbers, Hung's 37 marathons (26.2 miles) totaled 969.4 miles, 1,693,824 yards, 5,801,469 feet and 2,328,262 total steps and upon hearing these numbers Hung was matter of fact about it: "It really was never about breaking the record. It was about continuing the tradition. At the end, I was a little disappointed in my final race because I wanted to finish the race with a time of 5:30 but I missed it by 10 minutes, but that was okay. I finished healthy and strong, and I did not have to crawl home and crawl up the stairs. I felt good and still do. As I do normally, I will take a month off from running and will do some hiking. I do not have any prescribed plans after that but I will still do casual running."

To complete the circle, it may just be around Lake Merritt.

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[back](#)

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