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JEFF GERRITT

Running away from addictions

Ex-U.S. attorney steps up to help Detroit's homeless people

August 23, 2007

As the U.S. attorney in Detroit from 2001 to 2004, Jeffrey Collins was the federal government's local point man in the war on terror. Now, when he's not in court as a private lawyer, Collins is fighting battles a lot closer to the ground.

Every Saturday at 6:30 a.m. sharp, Collins, 48, an avid runner who has clocked a marathon in 3 hours and 16 minutes, leads a group of 20 to 25 homeless men and women on a 3-mile run or walk -- nine laps around Detroit's Cass Park. They started in early June with just three laps.

On the park's cracked, littered asphalt, while the benches are still empty, Collins warms up the runners with 50 jumping jacks, 20 side-hops and 60 seconds of running in place. At 5-foot-7 and 145 pounds, he barks out the counts like a drill sergeant.

A Neighborhood Service Organization board member, Collins got the idea for the weekly run by watching an ESPN report on a soccer team in New York made up of homeless men. Collins and Joseph Howse, a director at NSO, then recruited runners by visiting homeless shelters up and down the Cass Corridor.

"I told them I had an addiction," Collins, 48, said last week. "I'm not addicted to drugs or alcohol. I'm addicted to running. I asked them to come out Saturday mornings, experience a running high and trade one addiction for another.

"They took the bait."

Collins, who runs 50 to 60 miles a week, started the run to get the men and women in shape for NSO's first 5K Detroit RiverRun & Walk on Sept. 8. The Road to the RiverRun program isn't about breaking records -- it's about breaking addictions and improving physical and mental health.

Curt and Judy Munson, who own Playmakers in Okemos, donated the shoes. Runners range in age from 25 to 76. Some run. Some walk and run. Some just walk. But they all do their best.

Isiah Pettaway, 56; Kenneth Page, 55, and Robert Lewis, 53, told me running has made them feel better and helped them cut down on harmful habits such as smoking. Besides Saturdays, the three run or walk during the week on their own.

"Being active has helped my self-esteem," Pettaway said.

Page said training for the 5K run has given him purpose and introduced him to a good group of people. "Now, when we see each other on the street, we wave," he said. "There's unity there and people know we're trying to do something."

Pettaway, a former maintenance worker, lost his job because of a neck and spinal injury. Page worked as a cook until the fast-food restaurant closed. Lewis, who removed his baseball cap to reveal a dented skull, suffered a brain injury when he was assaulted six years ago.

Pettaway and Page work at odd jobs when they can, and Lewis gets Social Security benefits. But they

PHOTOS

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(HUGH GRANNUM/DFP)

Jeffrey Collins, 48, center, ex-U.S. attorney in Detroit, warms up his runners Saturday at Cass Park as they train for a 5K race in September. The runners were recruited from homeless shelters along the Cass Corridor. "I asked them to ... experience a running high and trade one addiction for another," says Collins. Helping in the training is Gary Brown, 53, center left, of Detroit.

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don't receive enough to pay for their own places. So they wait for subsidized housing.

The affordable-housing problem will get even worse for Detroit's nearly 15,000 homeless people. Development has pushed out low-rent housing and hotels along the Cass, Woodward and Brush corridors. Detroit must move forward without mowing people over. If the city wants homeless people to move from one area, it must make sure they have adequate housing and services elsewhere.

Working with the runners gives Collins more satisfaction than simply writing a check, though donating money is important, too, he added with a laugh.

"Different people have different comfort levels, but I like to be on the front lines," he said. "I want to have eyeball to eyeball contact."

Collins took that philosophy to the U.S. Attorney's office, where he built bridges with the Muslim community following 9/11. I often bumped into him then at schools and recreation centers during gun safety workshops and anti-violence rallies sponsored by the Youth Initiatives Project and other community groups. He understood the importance of getting the support of people on the block and in the neighborhoods.

Today, Collins is a partner in the Detroit law firm of Phiher & White. Specializing in white-collar defense, he earns a lot more than the \$138,000 a year he made as U.S. attorney. But he hasn't sold out. Collins understands that the city can't rise up without uplifting those in the shadows.

Sometimes, giving a little of yourself is the best way to do it.

*For more information on Neighborhood Service Organization's 5K Detroit RiverRun & Walk, call Joseph Howse at 313-961-4890 or go to www.nso-mi.org. **JEFF GERRITT** is a Free Press editorial writer. Contact him at 313-222-6585 or gerritt@freepress.com.*

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