News



Sr. Stephanie Baliga, a Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist of Chicago, runs on a treadmill in the basement of her community's convent Aug. 15, 2020. On Aug. 23 she will run a marathon on the treadmill to raise money for the Mission of Our Lady of the Angels and will attempt to set a world record for women's treadmill marathoning. (CNS photo/Chicago Catholic/Karen Callaway)

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Sr. Stephanie Baliga, a Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist of Chicago, will run a marathon Aug. 23 on a treadmill in the basement of her community's convent in the city's West Humboldt Park neighborhood.

Why? Because she promised. And because she is trying to break the world record for a women's treadmill marathon.

Baliga is in charge of Team OLA, a group that runs the Chicago Marathon and the Shamrock Shuffle and raises money to support the outreach efforts of the Mission of Our Lady of the Angels on Chicago's West Side, where her community lives and ministers.

Convinced that the 2020 marathon wouldn't be canceled because of the pandemic, she told team members that she would run a marathon on the treadmill if it did. On July 13, organizers announced the race's cancellation.

"I'm sticking to the word because I'm real stubborn," Baliga said, laughing. "It's going to be awesome."

Her run will be livestreamed on YouTube and people can donate to Team OLA during and after her run at missionola.com.

All donations go toward Team OLA's fundraising goal of $146,000, which will put them over the $1 million mark collected since the team's inception in 2011. There are 103 people on Team OLA who would have run the marathon and 50 others who were going to run the Shamrock Shuffle.

When running she forgoes her Franciscan habit. Instead she wears a bandana to cover her head, a Team OLA T-shirt, a long skirt and running shoes.

In addition to wanting to bring some lighthearted fun to people during the pandemic, she has two other reasons for running on a treadmill instead of outside.

"I am running also inside in solidarity with all of the seniors and homebound people who have been stuck in their houses all of this time," Baliga told Chicago Catholic, the archdiocesan newspaper. "And lastly, if I run under 3:30, I will break the world record for women treadmill marathoning."

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Breaking that world record isn't out of the realm of possibility because Baliga was a track star at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and regularly runs marathons. Her fastest marathon time is 2:53.

She also has attempted to qualify for the Olympic Marathon Trials and has come close to being successful.

"I'm not in that shape for even outdoor marathoning right now. Not even close. I'd probably be able to run a 3:15 outdoor marathon right now but I'm not going to try and do all out on the treadmill because that would be horrible," she said.

While training for a marathon, most people do several runs a week at different distances. Not Baliga.

"I train, some, not every day. So there's this beautiful thing I do now called teaching children that takes up a lot of time," she said, laughing again.

She runs once or twice a week, with one of the runs being at least 15 miles. She also gets a lot of exercise working at the Mission of Our Lady of the Angels through efforts like the weekly food pantry.

"I literally move around nonstop eight hours a day," Baliga said. "At Tuesday's food pantries, I think I move 15 to 16 miles and half of it is running and half of it is pushing pallets around. So I do a lot of cross training."

The YouTube broadcast won't just be her running on a treadmill marathon.

"The only thing possibly more boring than running a marathon on a treadmill would be watching me run a marathon on a treadmill," she said. "Every 15 minutes we will

have people coming on to join me through Zoom."

All the money raised this year will go toward the mission's outreach efforts and continued renovation of the former Our Lady of the Angels School into a new outreach center for the mission. Team OLA plans to run a socially distant marathon in the south suburbs in October.