

Australian runner hits the wall – for a good cause

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Megan Payne hit the wall recently in more ways than one.

The Sydney social worker and long-distance runner recently completed one of the most daunting tests of physical endurance to raise money for the poor in Bangkok's biggest slum.

The 30-year-old ran the Great Wall Marathon in Beijing and put herself through six hours of extreme agony.

The Chinese marathon is considered one of the world's toughest. Unlike the 42-km event held in Bangkok each November, which Payne completed in 2003, the Beijing run includes two gruelling sections – up and down the Great Wall.

That makes it much more difficult than other famous marathons run over flat courses in places like London and New York.

The Australian runner, one of more than 700 who attempted the marathon, said the Chinese event was a cruel test that nearly proved too much.

"It was far harder this time than in 2003," she said, adding that she had to run up and down 17,500 steps at the Great Wall.

"At around 30 kilometres, I was beginning to feel like I couldn't go on. It just hurt so much you didn't want to finish – but I kept thinking about raising money."

Runners use the expression "hitting the wall" to describe the agony they go through in the latter part of marathon events when their bodies have exhausted the glycogen, or natural fuel, in their leg muscles.

They are forced to struggle on while their bodies basically burn fat for energy.

The motivation for Payne's extraordinary achievement is an Australian nun called Sister Joan Evans, who has been helping the poor in the Klong Toei slum since the early 1990s.

Payne worked as a volunteer with Sister Joan during a two-year stint in Bangkok up to 2003 and has never forgotten the work she does helping the elderly and sick, and providing school uniforms

and education fees for slum kids.

"If it weren't for Sister Joan, I am not sure I would have made it. But somehow I managed to finish," she said.

"Sister Joan makes a lot of sacrifices, so I want to do something that reflects what she does and that's why I chose the Great Wall marathon. "Another reason for my run is to thank to Thailand for the opportunity to live and work here."

In 2003, Payne raised nearly 30,000 Australian dollars (Bt932,000), which bought Sister Joan a new van and computer to help her ferry people to and from hospital and other tasks.

She hopes to raise a similar amount this time, but won't know how much until next month.

"All the money will go for school uniforms, education fees and helping [slum] people pay bills," she said.

The money is much needed. With the start of the new school semester, Sister Joan has spent more than Bt350,000 paying for uniforms, bags and other costs for more than 550 children in and around the Rong Mu (Slaughterhouse) slum.

Payne has received strong support from the Thai-Australian Chamber of Commerce, as well as her local community in Bankstown, to the west of Sydney.

With a degree in International and Community Development, Payne is now doing social work in Sydney for the state government. Her job involves often-difficult cases of child abuse or family trauma, but Payne said she enjoys interacting with people and the challenge of her work.

"The job is great if you look into doing a great thing in life," Payne said.

She hopes to come back to work in Thailand, which has a special place in her heart. Like the devoted 71-year-old nun she idolises.

Anyone interested in making a donation can do so through e-mail at sisterathon2@hotmail.com.

Pathomkanok Barnes

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