

SPORTS

Garfield High students' spirit of achievement will stride through the L.A. Marathon



Israel Hernández, left, coach Raymond Eason and Celeste Ortega are part of the Garfield High team that will run under Students Run LA in the Los Angeles Marathon this Sunday. (Eduard Cauich)

On Sunday, 2,500 students like Israel Hernandez, a cancer survivor, will run in the 38th edition of the Los Angeles Marathon as part of

Students Run LA.

BY EDUARD CAUICH | COLUMNIST, STAFF WRITER

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Israel Hernández, a senior at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles with wavy, green-dyed hair, ran his first marathon in eighth grade. It was so much fun that he decided to do it several more times.

But in 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, while training for the Los Angeles Marathon, Hernández felt the first symptoms of a serious illness.

“I had pain in my chest and in other parts of my body,” said Hernández, who was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

His mother, Josefina Montero, was scared when she saw his X-rays after taking him to the hospital. She cried a lot but never lost faith and encouraged her son every time he had to undergo exhausting chemotherapy sessions.

Hernández said he drew inspiration from his mother telling him that undergoing chemotherapy was like finishing a marathon.

“She told me never to give up and to keep going,” Hernandez said.

Hernández missed out on running the marathon in 2021. He underwent six chemotherapy sessions and now goes to the doctor every six months for checkups. After being cleared by his doctors, he returned to his training group, Students Run LA, last year.

“It was very difficult because I couldn’t fulfill my dream. My dream was to be the fastest, but my mom told me that health always came first,” said Hernández, who ran the marathon’s 26.2 miles in 4 hours 14 minutes in ninth grade; last year he ran it in 5:45.



“It’s understandable because I haven’t been running since the chemotherapy. I hope this year I have a better time,” he said.

Sunday, Hernández and some 2,500 other students will run in the 38th edition of the marathon as part of Students Run LA. They will be joined by nearly 500 adult volunteer mentors, many of whom are teachers and administrators at the students’ schools.

The marathon will include athletes from all 50 states and more than 67 countries, on a course that begins at Dodger Stadium and passes through West Hollywood and Beverly Hills before ending in Century City.

The courage and positivity of Hernández has surprised his coaches, who say he has become more confident as he has continued.

“What happened to him is something that he didn’t wish on anyone, but he has a lot of enthusiasm and energy. Other students or adults would have already given up. He keeps coming to train. I’ve done the marathon so many times, but this is inspiring,” said Students Run LA Garfield coach Abraham López, who has run the marathon 22 times.

For Students Run LA, the marathon is the culmination of seven months of hard work and dedication. It brings together more than 185 school groups representing disadvantaged communities, from the San Fernando Valley to Whittier, San Pedro to Eagle Rock, and everywhere in between.

Raymond Eason, the Students Run LA coach at Garfield High, has coached the school’s students since 1998 and continues to along with López, Erika Ramirez and Cindy Cumbess.

“Israel has a lot of energy. With everything that has happened, you would not realize it, because when he comes here he gives everything he has. He keeps the team very

motivated,” Eason said.

“They learn patience and that they receive something important when they put in the effort,” López added.

Celeste Ortega, born in East Los Angeles and raised in Puebla, Mexico, is one of Hernández’s eight teammates at Garfield. In normal years, the school team has a couple dozen runners, but that number dwindled during the pandemic.

Ortega returned to Southern California two years ago in search of a better future, while her closest family members, including two younger brothers and an older sister, remained in Mexico.

“I came here for my family. I want to help them one day. I know that one day we will be together,” said Ortega, 18.

For Ortega, running the marathon has been an opportunity to expand her horizons, make new friends and build community in a new home.

She came to school in the U.S. in the spring of 2021 and lives with her aunt Jeanette Rosas and her cousin, Axel, who was part of the SRLA at Garfield. Axel learned that his cousin liked to run during a visit to Mexico and inspired her to join the SRLA team.

“I want to be another source of pride for my family and the family I’m living with right now, and also all these achievements I’ve made are thanks to my cousin Axel; he’s the one who motivates me,” said Ortega, whose dream is to go to USC to study physical therapy.

Being a part of SRLA has allowed Ortega to improve her English and build a community beyond her classroom. She said the best part of SRLA is working toward your goals with other students and faculty.

“It’s tough but for me, at first I thought it wasn’t much for me. I couldn’t hold on at Mile 22 anymore; I felt like I couldn’t hold on,” Ortega recalled. “But I liked it and now I am preparing for my second race and I want to do a third one.”



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