



NEWS/LOCAL

Students Run LA Holiday Half Marathon Includes Community Service

SRLA students who participate gain more than fitness – they gain discipline, confidence and knowledge that they can complete a difficult task and set high goals

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Sepulveda Middle School SRLA participants take on the rainy half marathon.

Hundreds of runners from San Fernando Valley Middle and High Schools completed the next step on their journey to the Los Angeles Marathon. A total of 185 schools, including numerous schools from the valley, participated in the Students Run LA (SRLA) Holiday Half Marathon Sun., Dec. 11, at the Pomona Fairplex.

This was SRLA's 34th marathon-training session.

For the six months leading up to the LA Marathon, SRLA students from 12 – 18 years old, build their endurance with community races that are progressively longer distances.

This 13.1 mile race marked the halfway point in their training for the LA Marathon.

“Our program is based around the school year. We start in September, and we go until the marathon in March, and every month, we bring students to a new event each time progressively increasing the distance,” said SRLA spokesperson Cassidy Smith.

“We start with a 5k. In September, we do a 10k; in October, a 15k. In November, they have a half-marathon, during the winter, one more 30k race, which will be in February, and then the marathon so we really break down the goal of the 26.2-mile marathon into achievable goals every month for the students.”

SRLA is a school-based program run by teachers and administrators at the school sites who train with the students. The SRLA program is different from cross-country, track and basketball programs.



Students and teachers from Thoreau High School and Taft High School show off their medals after completing the Holiday Half Marathon.

“The teachers aren’t on the sidelines coaching students, – they’re actually running the races with the students,” said Smith. “We had 500 leaders at the holiday half marathon running in the rain, with the students. These [leaders] are their teachers, their principals and staff from their school sites, who are running with them and mentoring them, as well as [additional] students in their classes who are running with them as well. So it creates a great community, a very close knit group,” she explained.

Bring Joy With a Toy

During this event, SRLA students participated in a community service project to celebrate the holiday season called “Bring Joy with a Toy.”

Students put some thought into collecting toys that promote fitness for students at local elementary schools.

“We leave it to the groups [of students] about what they want to donate,” said Albel Navar, SRLA coordinator. “From this event we received different types of balls, jump ropes and a baseball glove.”

The schools that received toy donations this year were Chatsworth Elementary, Ellen Ochoa Elementary in Cudahy and Fishburn Elementary in Maywood.

History of SRLA

This successful program began with one teacher. In 1986, Harry Shabazian, a continuation high school teacher in Boyle Heights, ran his first marathon. After he finished, he felt so personally transformed by the accomplishment, he challenged his students to train with him for the next LA Marathon. The experience changed their lives too.

His students were often negatively labeled and viewed as underachievers who were at-risk for dropping out of school – but that perception was proven wrong when they not only finished the LA Marathon, they finished high and went to college and jobs.

Two years later, Eric Spears and Paul Trapani, who were teachers at John R. Wooden Continuation High School in Reseda, joined Shabazian and organized a run with their students and had the same life-changing results.

LAUSD later established the program as an after-school program for at-risk students and the program continued to grow. What started out with one teacher has grown into having hundreds of teachers from hundreds of schools running alongside thousands of students today. Shabazian is now retired but is a volunteer for SRLA.

Success of the Program is More Than Fitness

While establishing healthy habits for exercise and nutrition is a huge accomplishment – the SRLA program also establishes discipline and follow through that has proven to translate to more success

“We’ve had students who started in seventh grade, and have continued running all the way up into high school. By the time they’ve graduated high school, they’ve completed six or seven marathons,” said Smith.

“Being part of the program gives the students lifelong healthy habits like exercising and eating well, but we’re also turning out students who become college students who go on to careers, who know how to set goals and have the self-confidence to achieve success in life after high school.

“Our students, when they go through the program, a lot of them learn something called the SRLA method that they can apply to their schoolwork and their other goals. It’s basically taking a big task, and breaking it down into small steps that they know they can achieve. So, just having that mindset when approaching going to college, and schoolwork, can make a huge difference,” Smith explained.

The mentorship and community support students receive makes a difference in widening their cultural perspectives and geographic horizons. In preparation, for the six months leading up to the LA Marathon, they go to community races in areas they have never visited.

“Since we’re in 185 schools all around LA ,we take students from all corners of LA. They meet other students from across the San Fernando Valley, Pomona, downtown LA, and Long Beach who they wouldn’t otherwise have a chance to meet. There are definitely friendships that form between students from all across the city,” said Smith.

For 33 years, Students Run LA (SRLA), a local nonprofit, has provided a free youth mentoring, marathon-training program throughout Greater Los Angeles. Each year, SRLA creates a safe, supportive community at 185+ public schools, welcoming more than 3,250 students of all backgrounds and abilities to train alongside their volunteer teachers to complete the Los Angeles Marathon. Annually, more than 95% of the students who attempt the Marathon complete the 26.2-mile course; and more than 95% of the seniors in SRLA graduate from high school with plans to attend college the following fall, 75% of whom are the first in their families to go to college.

For more information go to: www.srla.org

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