

LOCAL NEWS

This once-teased LA teen aims to 'dominate' at LA Marathon despite Woolsey fire, other training disruptions

Pedro Rodriguez is among thousands of at-risk LA students running in Sunday's LA Marathon



Pedro Rodriguez, a sophomore at John F. Kennedy High School who used to be overweight and teased until he started training for marathons with Students Run Los Angeles, runs around the Granada Hills school as he trains for the upcoming marathon on Thursday, March 14, 2019. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Pasadena Star-News/SCNG)

By **BRENDA GAZZAR** | bgazzar@scng.com | Daily News



GRANADA HILLS – John F. Kennedy High School sophomore Pedro Rodriguez has had an unusual year training for the upcoming 2019 Los Angeles Marathon.

For the first time in its 30-year history, Students Run LA — which trains at-risk secondary students to complete the annual marathon— had to cancel a 15K training race at Lake Balboa’s Woodley Park in November due to poor air quality from the massive Woolsey fire.



Pedro Rodriguez, a sophomore at John F. Kennedy High School who used to be overweight and teased until he started training for marathons with Students Run Los Angeles, runs with Naomi Rich, of SRLA, around the Granada Hills school as he trains for the upcoming marathon on Thursday, March 14, 2019. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Pasadena Star-News/SCNG)

Then, Rodriguez wasn’t able to participate in the 18-mile Friendship Run at Hansen Dam in February after a tire was stolen that day off his mother’s car. Days of heavy rain have also disrupted training in recent weeks.

But the aspiring neurosurgeon, who is running Sunday’s marathon for the third year, said he was able to make up these losses and feels ready.

“I feel like I will dominate it; run it without any problems,” Rodriguez, 15, of Panorama City said from a Kennedy High classroom before an afternoon run through the community.

Rodriguez is one of more than 3,000 students trained by SRLA this season, said



The students, most of whom attend schools with significant impoverished populations, all come together once a month for a large training event as well.

In addition to the 15K race cancelled due to the Woolsey fire, some students were unable to attend January's half-marathon in Pasadena because of transportation issues caused by the Los Angeles Unified School District strike, Rich said. The course of the 18K Friendship Run at Hansen Dam also had to be adjusted due to mud from the winter rains.

"Missing a long run or missing too many runs can impact how prepared you are for the marathon...so that can impact your time, your strength, and readiness," Rich said.

While not every student could make up lost races, SRLA coaches have done "an incredible job" trying to accommodate students — sometimes by having them run laps around the school gym, she said.

"That's why this year has been special; it's our 30th but it's also been a really challenging year but they stuck with it," Rich said.

Since Rodriguez, raised by a single mother, joined Students Run LA as an eighth-grader at Francisco Sepulveda Middle School, his confidence and fitness levels have soared.

As a "really chubby" fifth grader, his doctor warned him that he had high cholesterol, was on the verge of diabetes and needed to lose weight. The boy started looking for ways to stay in shape, like repeatedly stepping up and down on a stool at home, while his mother created a healthy meal plan for him and the family.

"In middle school sometimes, they would joke about my weight, but once I started doing SRLA in eighth grade, people never talked about it because they knew I was running," Rodriguez said. "Some of them even called themselves fat because they felt I was doing more than what they were doing."

That change, along with his doctor's encouragement, made him feel not only "really powerful" but "empowered to keep doing this."

Mary Cervantes, a special education coordinator at Kennedy High School and SRLA leader, has watched Rodriguez become "a lot faster" and more confident compared to last year. Cervantes ran the marathon for the first time five years ago as a friend or helper of the organization. She was 57 at the time, she said. Her




“It was hard, but ... you just keep training and training and I did it,” Cervantes said. Now, gearing up for her fifth marathon, the teacher said she enjoys helping students like Rodriguez succeed in doing something most other people haven’t accomplished.

“It makes them feel they can get things done,” Cervantes explained. “If you can run a marathon, you can finish college. If you can run a marathon, you can be successful.”

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Brenda Gazzar

Brenda Gazzar is a multilingual multimedia reporter who has worked for a variety of news outlets in California and in the Middle East since 2000. She has covered a range of issues, including breaking news, immigration, law and order, race, religion and gender issues, politics, human interest stories and education. Besides the Los Angeles Daily News and its sister papers, her work has been published by Reuters, the Denver Post, Ms. Magazine, the Jerusalem Post, USA Today, the Christian Science Monitor, the Los Angeles Jewish Journal, The Cairo Times and others. Brenda speaks Spanish, Hebrew and intermediate Arabic and is the recipient of national, state and regional awards, including a National Headliners Award and one from the Associated Press News Executives' Council. She holds a dual master's degree in Communications/Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Texas at Austin.

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