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Students Run LA is about lifelong success through mentoring, and LA Marathon is the finish line

The 32-year-old organization on Sunday will compete in a 10K in La Puente, which will be the second leg of its six-months journey to March's big race.



When Paul Trapani talks about Students Run LA, it's obvious the organization holds a special place in his heart.

“It gives me the satisfaction of knowing that I’ve made a difference in the lives of many who may not have had opportunity,” said Trapani, who co-founded SRLA in 1989 with Eric Spears.

He’s talking about the opportunity for middle school and high school students in underserved communities to feel good about themselves and reach their potential via mentoring from what the SRLA’s Marathon Leaders — volunteer teachers who share a months-long journey culminating with participation in the LA Marathon.

There are currently just under 3,000 students in SRLA from over 180 public schools in the greater Los Angeles area. They, along with 500 Marathon Leaders, will be on the streets of [La Puente](#) on Sunday for the SRLA Strength 10K, the organization’s second competitive leg ahead of the 2022 LA Marathon on March 20.

“It’s a character-revealing, character-building program that uses the training for the marathon as a way to develop those qualities that make people good people,” Trapani said.

The public can sign up for Sunday’s event at <https://runsignup.com/Race/CA/LaPuente/SRLABeachcomber10K>. It also has a 5K and begins at 7:30 a.m. on Main St. in Downtown [La Puente](#). Proceeds benefit SRLA.

Trapani, a retired social studies teacher from John R. Wooden High School — a continuation school in Reseda — said that long ago he was influenced by East L.A. continuation high school teacher Harry Shabazian. He ran the LA Marathon in 1986 and then called on his students to run the next one.

“I read about Harry and his challenging these students and it was the inspiration for me to want to do this,” Trapani said



He said about 90% of the Marathon Leaders are classroom educators, with the rest coming from law enforcement. He wanted to make it clear that they are not there as part of a marathon-training program, even though running the event is what eventually happens.

“Ultimately, our purpose is to develop character and to reveal it,” Trapani said.

Speaking in proud tones, Trapani said that typically 99% of his student runners will finish the LA Marathon, and that 95% of them graduate high school. The mentoring from the Marathon Leaders plays a big role in that success.

“That is the purpose of the program,” Trapani said. “Because the journey isn’t just one event. And the journey is something they share together, and they’re training. This is, to me, the real value of the program, or much of it, is the relationships they’re building with these teachers that are more than just classroom-related; they’re life-related.”

After Sunday’s event there will be a 15K in November, a half-marathon in December, another half-marathon in January, a 30K in February and then the marathon.

David Dorf is the primary Marathon Leader from Twin Lakes School in El Monte. His team of 7th- and 8th-grade students has 22 participants. He has been involved with SRLA for seven years.

Dorf said one would expect these students to be tired after all that running. Nope.

“The crazy thing is that after the season’s over, these kids really miss ... maybe not so much running 20 miles in one day, but they really miss that continuity, they really miss that family structure because SRLA for them is truly a second family,” Dorf said.

One of his team members echoes that sentiment.

“The thing I like most about being involved with Students Run LA is my team,” said Hayden Nguyen, an 8th-grader at Twin Lakes. “Even though we have only been training a month, I have begun to think of them as family. We push each other past our limits and support each other throughout the entire way.

“Running in events or training in SRLA makes me feel confident in my ability to do anything as long as I put my mind to it.”



“I’ve always kind of gravitated toward organizations like this because I’ve been with the City of Industry Sheriff’s Youth Activities League for 27 years and these are the same type of kids that we’ve always tried to mentor and go after and any organization that does these things, naturally I want to try to help out because I truly believe that the younger generation, the younger children, we need to be mentoring and working with to help them,” Klinakis said.

SRLA most recently partnered with La Puente for a running event in 2015.

Trapani’s goal is that these students become all they can be in life. Ironically, not only did Trapani teach at John R. Wooden High, he said the legendary UCLA basketball coach was his wife’s grandfather.

“When I thought of this as a program, I really kind of looked at what Coach Wooden would do in terms of what his vision would be in terms of giving students opportunity to experience success,” Trapani said. “My idea I borrowed from Coach is that success is peace of mind knowing you did the best you can do.”

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