

Program Script for Asst. Prof. Itir Erhart (Aired on 01 November 2009)

Category: Civi Participation

Location: Istanbul

The last 100 metres of the Eurasian Marathon. An Ethiopian athlete, Lishan Yegazu, is still running.

He runs out of breath and falls in a heap. However, he does not give up because Yegazu knows that finishing the 42km-long marathon is more important than winning it.

He gets up again, cheered on by the crowd but he does not have enough energy to keep running.

He gets up with the last bit of energy he has left, looks at the finish line and tries to run again.

Lishan Yegazu taught a great lesson of sportsmanship to hundreds of spectators and millions of TV viewers watching him. He became the champion of the Eurasian Marathon in people’s hearts.

Although they did not make the headlines, there were other Changemakers running in the marathon.

209 members of the “Step by Step” organization ran not only for themselves, but also for paraplegic people in need of a battery-operated wheelchair.

And with every drop of their sweat, they were helping someone in need.

Interview with marathon participant:

Runner: “For the first time in the history of this marathon we will be running for charity with the “Step by Step” group. This year, we are running to provide the Turkish Paraplegics Foundation with battery-operated wheelchairs.

Over 200 members of our group will be running today. Everybody sent e-mails, donations started coming in. We raised 33.000 USD as of last Friday. Hopefully donations will keep coming in after the marathon.”

Interview with another marathon participant:

Runner: “You always feel like the winner of the race if you are running for charity. And that is what counts. We hope that more and more people will join us.

There is a true Changemaker at the forefront of this organization consisting of amateur runners with the goal of fundraising for various NGOs.

Asst. Prof. Itir Erhart is a 33-year-old academician and is currently teaching at Bilgi University in Istanbul. Her first acquaintance with the project that changed her life happened in the United States.

An advertisement she saw in Chicago, where she was working as a visiting lecturer, introduced her to her new idea,

Interview with Itir Erhart:

Itir Erhart: “It was 2004. I was in Chicago, working there as a guest lecturer. At a bus stop, I saw an ad that said “Would you like to run a marathon for leukemia patients?”. Trust me; I hadn’t even run 100 metres before that day. I told myself: “How nice, I am going to learn how to run while fundraising for an NGO. People who are running aren’t that different than me”.

I started running with a team. First practice runs were 3 miles (5km) long. I found it to be really hard at first. However, once I finished those 3 miles, I started to believe that I could run that marathon in 5 months.

In the meantime, they were teaching us about fundraising techniques. They educated us on how to formulate messages and which donors to send requests to.

I was running while I was fundraising. Thereby, I ran my first marathon for a leukemia foundation.

Itir Erhart wanted to realize this project immediately after her return to Turkey.

She also started looking for other amateur runners who would volunteer to run a marathon for charity. What she sought in the streets, she found on a radio program.

Interview with Itır Erhart:

Itır Erhart: “I learned from a radio program that a group of people were running in the forest on a regular basis. I called the radio and asked them to introduce me to those people.

We met up in the forest and started running together. Afterwards, I shared with them what is done in the United States and told them that I wish to see the same thing being organized Turkey. Then, thanks to a newspaper we saw an ad that there is someone called Renay with a similar goal.

We met up with Renay and asked her how she implements her project. Thereby, we formed our ‘core team’ of 5-6 people. Many people supported us. We were supported by the Koç Foundation. We asked them about how to fundraise and the possibility of running for charity.

This movement that started with a single person started expanding. The hardest part though, was to explain the method of fundraising to people. “Step by Step” was easily finding runners, but not many any fundraisers.

And even when they found fundraisers, the issue of finding organizations to accept those funds remained.

Interview with Itır Erhart:

Itır Erhart: “We accept everybody to our group as a runner. It doesn’t matter if you had never run before. Until 5 years ago, I had never run before!

We train together with our runners and we educate them on how to fundraise. They become our members and start running with us. Afterwards, they send a message to their contact list saying: “I am running for such-and-such NGO”.

They usually pick an NGO and send the fundraising message to their immediate surroundings. This is very important, as these messages run the risk of being perceived as spam. Therefore our members contact their immediate surroundings. If we have 300 runners, our message can reach thousands of people.

After picking the organization you want to run for (for example -The Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey -) you send a message indicating that you are running for Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey and include their bank account details. Thereby people can donate to Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey on your behalf. These donations are added up and later we can find out how much every member raised at the end.

The first organization to believe in their project was the Paraplegia Foundation of Turkey (PFT).

Paraplegics who were doomed to look at the world from behind their window bars started waiting in hope for their battery-operated wheelchairs.

Interview with a person with paraplegia:

Interviewee: “I became acquainted with “Step by Step” through the Paraplegia Foundation of Turkey. Their mission really struck me.

I knew a lot of people who were running only to lose weight. There are a lot of people like that even here, in this forest. They run without a purpose. However, “Step by Step” ran for people with disabilities who need wheelchairs. That’s a great source of pride for me.

I became a member of the organization. I am very happy to be a part of “Step by Step” as we are helping other people with disabilities. There are so many people who cannot leave their homes to get some fresh air, or even move within their homes because they do not have a battery-operated wheelchair. That’s very important.

I became paraplegic after a serious accident. Life was over for me. I didn’t leave home for 2 years. I was at home waiting for death to come, until I was given a battery-operated wheelchair. That was thanks to the “Step by Step” organization.

Now I can go to park by myself, without the help of anyone else. That’s something very special. People with disabilities want to go places on their own. For instance, I met my girlfriend thanks to my battery-operated wheelchair!

I can go to the grocery store by myself, without anyone’s help. I can swim, dive and run. I can do everything. I wouldn’t have found out about this if I were at home. But I did, thanks to “Step by Step”.

There are many more people with disabilities, but they will also go out onto the streets. Just wait, your turn will come!”

Step by Step’s efforts did not only help with the purchase of battery-operated wheelchairs, but it also introduced many people with disabilities to running. While reminding them that they can do anything if they will, Step by Step made people with disabilities believe that they can even run a 42km-long marathon.

Today, extraordinary people are creating great impact with the “Step by Step” movement. Its members who used to -in their own words- run without a purpose are now running for a cause.

Interview with a foreign member of Step by Step:

Interviewee: “I have been living in Istanbul, Turkey for 3 years. I improved my Turkish here. I have been living in Istanbul, Turkey for 3 years. I improved my Turkish here. I decided to live here as I truly love Istanbul.

First when I moved here, I was not running too much. I was hesitant because not a lot of people run here. People were looking at me funny and wondering who I was and what I was doing. I did not know what to wear either. I got used to it slowly.

I have another purpose since I joined “the group. “Step by Step” is a great indicator of the beautiful and deep humanity of Istanbul.

I had never done such a thing before. And I did it in a new city. I experienced new feelings. And it truly made me happy!”

Interview with a runner:

Runner: “Two women ran by me while I was taking a rest in a park. I asked them where they were running to and if they were running with a group.

They told me about “Step by Step”. They told me that they were fundraising for NGOs by participating in races.

I thought that I can also be a part of this cause and became a member of “Step by Step”.

Running for a cause makes you feel very good. Just imagine, you are helping people in need when you are running.

We ran with our friends who have disabilities at the Eurasia Marathon. We are providing them with battery-operated wheelchairs.

As the “Step by Step” movement grows, its impact also grows. Today, these extraordinary people aren’t only running for people with paraplegia, but also to provide scholarship opportunities for students through the Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey and Community Volunteers Foundation.

Interview with member of Community Volunteers Foundation:

Interviewee: “We are the Community Volunteers Foundation (CVF). We made our acquaintance with “Step by Step” through their invitation.

They organized a meeting for many other NGOs. We attended that meeting. We decided together with “Step by Step” that they were going to support our Scholarship Fund. That’s very important for us. Because as the Community Volunteers Foundation, we are offering scholarships to about 500 university students.

These students do not only receive the scholarship and spend it on their education. In exchange for the scholarship, they have to do mandatory community service. They have to work as a volunteer for 4 hours a week, 16 hours a month and help us out on a project.

“Step by Step” is very important to us, as they don’t run those marathons only to fundraise. Along with the Community Volunteers Foundation, every step they take offers a solution to the problems of our community.

Interview with member of Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey

Interviewee: “Thanks to the fundraising efforts of “Step by Step” members during the Antalya Marathon in March and the Istanbul Marathon in October, many children were able to receive educational support from our foundation.

As the Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey, we are offering educational support to children attending elementary school all across Turkey.

We asked “Step by Step” to support our cause. We asked them to fundraise for the yearly enrollment fees of children who attend our institution. This yearly fee is 25 Liras (20 USD) per child.

The members of “Step by Step” sent out messages asking for donations during the marathons in Antalya and Istanbul. And thanks to their efforts, hundreds of children were able to receive educational support from our foundation.

Interview with Itir Erhart:

Itir Erhart: “Nearly 500 people between the ages of 16 and 65 are members of the “Step by Step” organization and are running with us. Some of them participate in all marathons, some don’t. Some of them fundraise great amounts, some of them first want to run before fundraising.

We raised almost 330.000 USD in one year and a half. Most of it was for the Paraplegy Foundation of Turkey (PFT), as it is the organization that we have been working with for the longest time. 250.000 USD was raised for the PFT and 150 battery-operated wheelchairs were purchased with those funds. Rest of the funds were raised for the Community Volunteers Foundation and the Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey. We just ran the Eurasian Marathon, donations are still coming in. We are hoping that they will increase.

I did not consider this project feasible 5 years ago. I thought nobody would run or donate in Turkey. But I got very emotional during the Eurasian Marathon last week. There were more than a hundred people running for “Step by Step”. And people are donating. I am truly happy to see that these things are happening in Turkey.”

Years ago, Itir Erhart started working with a vision for change.

She expanded her project, seeking Changemakers like herself and along with them; she made a difference in the lives of others.

Instead of just running, she dedicated her sweat to a cause.

Although she was never obliged to do so, she lended a hand to people who are less fortunate than her.

She started her journey with small steps but made a huge difference in the lives of thousands of people.