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Via fundraising races continue to grow

Participation, profits rise for four-year-old event

By Tim Shoemaker, SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL

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Before Sunday, Brandon Risser said that his longest competitive road race was a 5K run last November.

Elizabeth James said that she was a middle-distance runner in high school and college, and before Sunday, she had competed in only three marathons.

So in a way, Risser and James are model representatives as winners of the fourth annual Lehigh Valley Health Network Marathon for Via, which began at the Lehigh Valley Hospital at 7 a.m. and ended in Easton's Centre Square. Like the Via races themselves, both Risser and James are new and successful in the marathon business.

Via, a non-profit group in Bethlehem that provides services for adults and children with disabilities, has sponsored a marathon race since 2007. Its profits from the race have increased from \$30,000 to \$130,000 in its first three years, while its participation has nearly doubled to more than 2,000. The event has grown from one race, a marathon, to four -- marathon, half-marathon, relay race and 5K walk.

Gerry Yasso, Via's vice president of resource development, said the event may spread out over an entire weekend in the future as its economic impact grows. He said that the gross revenue of the event is more than \$1 million and its net impact to the Lehigh Valley is now more than \$750,000.

"The government once paid for all (of Via's budget), now they only pay 70 percent," Yasso said. "What they don't pay for, we have to make up."

Ben Clarke of Morristown, N.J. won the men's half marathon in 1:11:32, while Bethlehem's Kathleen Jobses won the women's half marathon in 1:20:06.

Risser, 28, is a history teacher and cross country coach at Cedar Crest High School in Lebanon. He said that he decided to run the race in part to remember what it was like to run -- and to pass along something to his runners. He said winning was a surprise.

"I haven't raced since November last year," he said. "I just got in some really good training. I just kind of went for it. I went on a lot of long runs. I had no clue coming in. I just wanted to break 2:50. (He ran 2:42:33). That's why I chose this marathon. Now I can get back to my true focus on teaching and

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coaching my team to be fast, hopefully."

James, 27, finished second two years ago in a time of 3 hours, 10 minutes. She said that she started too fast, but after five miles, she knew she was the female leader and paced herself accordingly.

James is from Linfield, Montgomery County, and competed as a middle distance runner at Widner University. James came in at a tick under three hours in 2:59:59. Only five men beat her.

"(Winning is) pretty cool," she said. "The last couple miles were a little rough, but I held it together somehow. I didn't decide I was going to run it until June, so I don't know if I had enough time to prepare. I've been a runner all my life."

Tim Shoemaker is a freelance writer.

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