

OPEN MINDS AND OPEN TRAILS

Bulgaria Volunteers train for the Athens Marathon

by Neysa Nankervis

“What are you running away from?” “Why are you running?” “I don’t understand why you run by here everyday.” These are just a few of the questions we hear on a typical run in Bulgaria.

When Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) in Bulgaria get together one would think their stories would differ, given Bulgaria’s diversity. However there are certain attributes that are shared throughout the country. Bulgarians are generally superstitious, love their wine and rakia (an incredibly potent liquor made with fermented fruit), and are extremely family oriented. And for Volunteers who like to run, we now recognize one other thing that Bulgarians have in common—the cultural divide when it comes to running or jogging.



Seth Stewart

For life and health!

Bulgarians generally don’t run and they don’t understand why anyone would want to. When I tell them running is good for my health, I often get the reply, “Just drink rakia if you want to lower your blood pressure and

red wine if you want to raise it.” When I run in the summer my neighbor tells me that it is too hot outside and I will get sick. In the winter I literally have grandmothers chasing me to get inside because I am not wearing warm-enough socks and am going to catch a cold.

Normally these circumstances would be discouraging, but they have instead motivated me and many of my fellow Volunteers to run even more. Some of us even decided to run the original marathon, the course that started them all: Athens.

The first time I went running in Bulgaria I decided to explore the outskirts of my village. My counterpart drove by me and asked if I needed a ride somewhere. I told him no, that I like to run and wanted to run (that was all the Bulgarian I could manage at the time). Later that week a man approached me

From left to right,
Seth Stewart, Jose Luis
Lomeli, Robert Evans,
Neysa Nankervis,
Thomas Youtmans,
Cameron Ottens, Tracy
Minard, Jez McMillen
and Koji Dae.



Jose Luis Lomeli



In front of the Erechtheion. This is after the race, we are wearing our medals, and for some of us it was really hard to walk up those steps to see the sites as we were so sore!

Seth Stewart

looking very concerned. He told me that my counterpart had called saying that I must hate the village—why else would I be running away? He actually wondered if there was something wrong with me, and was scared that his Volunteer might have some “issues.” I assured the man that, no, as far as I am concerned I have no problems, and that running is quite normal in America.

His response: “You aren’t in America anymore.”

As the months went on and my Bulgarian improved, I was able to have full conversations with Bulgarians that I passed. I had to run through four different villages in order to rack up the mileage needed to train for a marathon. As I ran through one village there was an old man who always sat on a little bench in his front yard. I would wave to him and he would give me that confused look to which I had grown accustomed. One day, while herding his goats, he pointed at me with his shepherd’s stick and asked me to come over. He asked in a very quiet voice, “What are you running away from?” Nothing, I told him. I am running simply because I like it. He looked

A career that crosses borders.

Graduates of Lesley University’s Master’s program in Intercultural Relations pursue careers as diverse as the worlds they’ve experienced.

- International Education
- Conflict Transformation
- Advocacy and Social Change
- Intercultural Training and Management
- Leadership of Diverse Human Resources

NEW!

Low-Residency Program

In addition the on-campus program, Lesley now offers a low-residency model, ideal for working professionals.

Learn more!

www.lesley.edu/info/worldview



LESLEY
UNIVERSITY

Cambridge, Massachusetts

0212 001 0000

at me and asked if I was kidding. I explained that I am an American Volunteer living in the village next door and training for a marathon. His look of confusion instantly became a look of admiration and he scanned me up and down, seeing if in fact I was in good enough shape to run. When he had made his assessment (apparently I had passed) he said, "So will you run through here again?" From then on I looked forward to our random mid-run meetings where my new friend would offer words of encouragement, helping me to just keep running.

At times, our antics actually inspired Bulgarians to run with us. Early in her training, Tracy, one of the nine Volunteers training for Athens with me, was approached by a friend who wanted to come with her on a run:

I knew when Zicra got to my house that this run wasn't going to count for much in terms of a typical training-for-a-marathon-run. My friend showed up with some lovely Bulgarian sneakers—horrible shoes with no support and in no way fit for a good run. She was carrying a change purse and when I asked if she wanted to keep it at my apartment, she simply responded, "No, I need my phone." I thought to myself, "We'll be



Neysa Nankervis

There is one store in our village and this is the group of villagers that I always visit.

running so what's the use of a phone?" We walked towards the outskirts of the village to start our jog when Zicra turned towards a small shop. "To buy cigarettes!" she said with a smile. That day we probably only ran for three or four minutes but were gone for nearly two hours. Zicra has yet to go on another run with me. But, she tried it

that day and I was incredibly grateful for her ability to be open-minded.

For the Volunteers serving in Bulgaria we often feel lucky because the "conditions of hardship" we face may not be as physically challenging as they are for Volunteers in some other regions of the world. However, there are challenges we face every day, intangible ones that are sometimes hard to believe unless you have experienced them. But it is what makes us love Bulgaria.

In Athens, on the starting line of the race we yelled to each other the popular Bulgarian phrase, "For life and health!" Later that day, as we hobbled around with medals around our necks, we realized we were one and the same: we'd broken through a cultural barrier, turning the heads of Bulgarian farmers and grandmothers country-wide, and with pride had showed them what it was to be a runner.



Seth Stewart

From left to right Jose Luis Lomeli, Thomas Youmans and Neysa Nankervis posing with medals after finishing the race. We are tired, hungry, and really need to sit down but are so happy to be done that we can still manage smiles!

Neysa Nankervis is a Community and Organizational Development/Youth Development Volunteer living in a small village in Bulgaria. She works at a correctional school for youth, with the Alternative for Everyone Foundation, and with a doctor's office in a Roma neighborhood.