

Dear Road Runners Community,

Hello! My name is Philip Dierking, and for those of you who don't know me, I'm a Juneau resident and fellow member of the running community. I am a former runner of the JDHS Cross Country team, and an active summertime participant in the local SERR races.

Currently I'm residing outside of the great city of Juneau, and since September I have been living in the country of Djibouti. Djibouti is a small east African nation nestled between Somalia and Eritrea, and across the red sea from Yemen. I'm here with an American non-profit called the International Foundation of Education and Self-Help (IFESH), where I've been assigned to work at the University of Djibouti as an English Language Professor. It has been an incredible experience, which has taught me as much about myself and this world so far away as I have taught them about the English language.

Recently, I've been getting involved with the running community here, as any good SERR expat should. I've been fortunate enough to participate in several races so far, my favourite being a 15 km across the enormous desert of Grand Barra, which quite resembles Death Valley in California. Currently I'm training for the Djibouti half-marathon, which will take place in February.

I'm writing you now regarding your interest in supporting a cause affecting both athletics and women's empowerment in Djibouti. For Djibouti, gender equality is a major issue and women's rights have been a long-fought battle. Things have been slowly improving for women here, but one of the most notable areas where women's participation is lacking has been with sports.

Djiboutian women rarely participate in athletics, nor are they even encouraged to. When they do decide to engage in sports, they often are ridiculed by the men. Last year, a fellow American non-profit, Research Exchanges International (REI), tried to address this problem by creating a 5 km fun run for International Women's Day (March 8th), and tried to target local women specifically to participate. They successfully had thirty-nine women enter; which was more woman participants than in the last five years of locally sponsored races combined.

When I heard the comments the Djiboutian women runners gave afterwards about the race, I knew this was a meaningful cause. One woman was surprised that "people were actually cheering me on, instead of making fun of me!" Because of the success, many women who didn't run the first time expressed their interest in participating this year. The most impressive story was that of a Djiboutian woman who finished the race in just over 21 minutes; and ran the entire course barefoot. "I tried to buy some last night, but all the shoes at the market were too expensive for me", was her reason.

After hearing this story, we decided that for this year we would like to provide every woman runner who finishes the race with a pair of running shoes (new or used). Our plans are to try to collect enough money to then purchase the shoes from the American military base located in Djibouti. I am wondering if the Southeast Road Runners community would be interesting in making a donation towards this cause. Donated shoes are also welcome, but due to the costs and time it takes to send items to Djibouti, we feel it will be most helpful to receive donations in the form of money, so we can purchase the shoes here.

We believe strongly in the impact of this event. With just the debut race of last year we saw how it impacted and promoted women's participation in sports, giving them confidence to come out and run despite the stereotypes that women shouldn't do sports. This encouraged participation has a trickle-down affect, promoting women's empowerment as well in a country that desperately needs it.

If this is a cause you feel you would be interested in supporting, donations can be sent to the REI US office:

Resource Exchange International
5446 North Academy Blvd. Ste. 202
Colorado Springs, CO 80918
USA

Donations designated for “Djibouti Race”, and marked “REI Djibouti”. If you are interested in donating on an individual basis, all donations are most welcome to and you can send those donations to the same address. Thank you very much for your time and consideration, and I hope the running trails in Juneau are keeping you healthy. I look forward to joining you on them when I return this summer!

Sincerely,

Philip Dierking
IFESH Volunteer 08/09