

NORTHWEST NOW

She survived the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing unharmed. A decade later, she's back in the race -- for a cause.

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When Beth Hartwig crossed the Boston Marathon finish line on April 15, 2013, she felt the usual way after any marathon: "Superhuman," she said. "If I can tackle that, I can tackle anything that comes my way."

That day, like at any other Boston Marathon, the crowd at the finish line along Boylston Street was cheering like crazy. "The energy just propels me to finish," the Menomonee Falls resident recalled.

Hartwig left for her nearby hotel room after she finished with a time of 3:28.55. But she quickly headed back because her older brother, David Pollard, who lives in Wauwatosa, was expected to finish his marathon about an hour later.

When she was in close view of the finish line, she heard an explosion, which at first she thought might somehow be part of the race. But then the scene of triumph gave way to panic, confusion, bloodshed and terror.

Her brother called, confirming there had been explosions. Hartwig's family members — her parents, Dennis and Kathy Pollard, and David's fiancée, Kelly (whom he later married) — were in different places around the finish line area. She needed to find them and get them to safety.

"Everything got quiet," recalled David Pollard, who had just finished and was about 100 feet past the finish line. "It was a very surreal experience. People scattered, and I had concern for my family."

The bombing that day was an act of terrorism, killing three spectators and injuring more 260 people. Seventeen people lost a limb.

For Hartwig, this was the reality: "People who had cheered me to finish during one of the most triumphant moments of my life were injured or killed an hour later."

Ten years later, Hartwig is training for the 2023 Boston Marathon on April 17. It will be her seventh.

She is running on a charity team, Rebekah's Angels Foundation, a nonprofit started by Boston Marathon bombing survivor, Rebekah Gregory, to fund therapy treatment for children suffering from trauma. Hartwig is hoping to raise \$10,000 for the charity. As of March 1, \$2,720 has been raised.

The journey to reclaim running as part of her identity

When Hartwig returned to Milwaukee after the 2013 race, "a piece of my heart was in Boston." She did not order pictures of herself finishing the marathon that year. How could she have a photo of herself smiling after such a tragedy?

She also did not display any of her marathon medals; it may come across as selfish when others had such suffering, she thought. They stayed in a box in the basement.

"I feel so grateful that we all made it through that experience safely. But a lot of people did not. And I have lived with a strong desire to do more, to be better, to find purpose, to feel worthy of that gift. In a lot of ways, that day has made me a better, stronger person," she said.

Running had always been a huge part of her identity.

Hartwig has been running since she was 14 and began running marathons when she was 18. At Divine Savior Holy Angels High School, she was a cross-country state qualifier and an indoor conference champion. At Marquette University, she ran three years of track and four years of cross-country.

Running was a family event. When she was 2, she attended her first Boston Marathon cheering her father, Dennis Pollard.

As a kid, she loved cheering on her dad near the finish line.

"I thought he was superman," she said.

Now, after nearly a 10-year break from marathon running — during which she started a family and had two children — Hartwig is back training.

She started doing 20-mile weekend runs, logging some late-night runs on her treadmill after teaching in the day, and doing pool running workouts to put less pressure on her joints. She runs about 40 to 50 miles per week.

Hartwig suffered from a nerve impingement which caused nerve damage about two years ago.

"There was a point where I truly didn't know if I would be able to run like this again. But slowly I regained strength and the ability to run with minimal pain. I still have some pain, but running brings me so much joy. As runners, you learn to push through pain," she said.

And the meaning of the journey is a bit different this time around.

"This journey is rediscovering pride in something that has meant so much to me. This is the first time in my life that my race will benefit others, and that is something I can take great pride in."

Running the Boston one year after the tragedy

Hartwig ran the Boston Marathon again with her brother a year after the bombing: It was something she said she had to do. But the atmosphere was not sad or depressing.

While there were many more security measures in place — bomb-sniffing dogs along the route, metal detectors and security checkpoints near the finish line — "I witnessed resilience," she said.

"It felt like a celebration. It was the biggest turnout of supporters," added Pollard. No one was going to bring us down, he said.

Hartwig saw those who were injured the year before either running or cheering on the runners. People passed out crocheted prayer shawls to runners — shawls made by people from all over the country.

"It helped me find peace with everything," she said. "I saw survivors coming back to reclaim the finish. They overcame horrific things, but I was watching them," she said.

An especially pivotal time was in 2015, when she learned of Gregory finishing the Boston Marathon.

In 2013, Gregory and her then 5-year-old son Noah were cheering on the runners. She was injured as she shielded her son from the bombings. She had 17 surgeries to try to save her leg but ended up getting it amputated.

She will be a spectator at the 2023 Boston Marathon.

Hartwig has been following Gregory's inspirational journey through social media. Gregory has been on the news and at various events sharing her story. She wrote a book, "Taking My Life Back: My Story of Faith, Determination, and Surviving the Boston Marathon Bombing" with Anthony Flacco that was published in 2017.

Gregory created Rebekah's Angels Foundation in 2018.

At age 5, Gregory said, Noah suffered from PTSD after seeing his mother hurt and lying in blood. He did not want to ride his bike or go to kindergarten. Now, the foundation provides funds to help others going through trauma receive services and treatment.

Gregory's resilience has been an inspiration for Hartwig.

"Seeing how she overcame a horrific day and became stronger inspired me," said Hartwig.

"None of them stopped living their lives," Hartwig said of the other survivors.

"I want to be a part of that, I want to make something good come out of it," she said.

The race is bigger than any one person

This past summer, her husband Todd dug out Hartwig's medals and displayed them in her bedroom. When Hartwig saw them, she admitted, it was "a bit of a gut punch."

"You have nothing to feel guilty about," Gregory told Hartwig. "You should feel proud."

She said she is honored to support the Rebekah's Angels Foundation because, as a teacher in Milwaukee, she has seen her students experience trauma at times. And she said that many do not seek treatment for the trauma, and it can forever change their lives.

"The experience and the history of the Boston Marathon is bigger than any one person. I want that race to benefit others," she said.

Her brother said he is very proud of her for what she is doing. "She is the most selfless and thoughtful person. The fact that she is putting her own energy to help other people, that is really, really cool," he said.

Hartwig said she is thrilled that her two sons — 6-year-old Abraham and 3-year-old Alexander — will be in the crowd cheering her on and experiencing the thrill of the Boston Marathon. She said she cannot wait to show them "the very best the human spirit has to offer."

"There is no place in this world where you can experience the full spectrum of human emotion like you can at the finish line on Boylston Street." she said. "I want them to see the amazing things people have overcome to achieve their goals. I want them to understand that bad things happen in this world, but they can't live in fear. They should simply strive that much harder to bring the good to light."

The biggest lesson she learned is that whatever happens, you just can't stop living.

"Whatever darkness there is, good always prevails."

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For more information

To make a donation toward Hartwig's race, visit bit.ly/BethHartwigmarathon.

For more information about the Rebekah's Angels Foundation, visit www.rebekahsangels.org.

To make an in-person donation, go to Goodmiles Running Company, 17155 W. Bluemound Road in Brookfield.

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