

ATHLETE PROFILE

Erin Sprague



by Jenna E. Caputo

Age: 24
Residence: Manhattan
Family: Parents, Bill and Gerri; siblings Colleen, 21; Cara, 19; Kevin, 17
Occupation: Financial Analyst, The Blackstone Group
Sports: Running, Skiing, Hiking, Swimming, Sailing,



CLOCKWISE ■ START OF 2006 BEIJING MARATHON ■ AFTER SETTING WORLD RECORD AT AUSTRALIA'S GOLD COAST MARATHON ON JULY 6, 2008 WITH IN THE RUNNING PARTNERS, KATHRYN HARRISON, DANA WORTH AND MOLLY POWERS ■ ANTARCTICA'S PARADISE BAY WITH SURROUNDING GLACIERS ■ CROSSING FINISH LINE AT 2008 ANTARCTICA MARATHON ■ WITH KEVIN AT TOP OF KILIMANJARO IN 2007

Erin Sprague is one of the most interesting and inspiring young women you may ever meet. At only 24 years old, Erin has done more and seen more of the world than most of us ever will in a lifetime – and all for a good cause. Not to mention, breaking a world record in the process!

Growing up in Queensbury, Erin knew even when she was a young, hard-working Queensbury High School student that she someday wanted to be based in a big city and travel around the world. Former high school cross-country coach Pat Darfler-Sweeney describes Erin as, “the perfect Renaissance woman who sought, and attained excellence in all she took part in.”

Jon Hoek, her former high school English teacher and coach said, “Simply put, Erin was one of the finest students I’ve ever had in class: bright, articulate and hard-working. That work ethic showed up in her running where she was part of a state championship cross-country running team, as well as numerous championship track & field and cross-country skiing teams.”

With the idea of traveling the world established early, Erin graduated from Harvard University in 2005, and decided to take action by going for the record to become the youngest woman to run seven marathons on seven different continents. Developing the plan with some friends from Harvard, she realized this would also be a good way to do something charitable.

The recent graduates had acquired new business skills and were beginning to use them in their full-time jobs. “We tried to take what we learned in a few years and put it to good use,” Erin said. They set up In The Running, the organization behind Erin’s races. Jon Hoek was not surprised by this decision. “When Erin graduated from Harvard, she sent a note telling me although she had landed a fine job in Manhattan, she would find a way to give back to society for all the blessings she had in her life. Well, InTheRunning.org became her way of giving back to society.”

In less than two years, the group researched and picked seven grassroots charities, one from each continent, which fight against today’s pressing problems within the continent and the world. After securing their list of organizations, In the Running had to factor vacation time, current marathon schedules, and the locations of qualified 26.2-mile races near the sponsored organizations, to finally come up with a seven race schedule that started in October 2006 in Beijing and ended in Australia this July.

Erin said the focus was initially on the marathons and the record, but as she traveled to each place and met with all of the organizations, and the local activists in each country, the charities became the “most interesting and inspiring part of this mission. Now, at the end, the record is not as important – it’s about the organizations.”

Erin certainly has had an interesting journey leading up to this record. Her running career started by joining her dad for his routine three-mile runs. She played a lot of sports, but began to realize that she excelled in the running aspect of all of them. After coming close to winning her school’s distance race in fifth grade, she trained for the following year’s race, and finished first by over 100 meters.

In middle school, Erin joined the cross-country team and continued running throughout high school and college, becoming a four-time all-state selection. Since she was attending college in Boston, she wanted to take part in the Boston Marathon while she was there. She began training and ran in the 2004 Dallas Marathon to qualify, then did the Boston Marathon in her senior year. “It was difficult at first, but I started enjoying the challenge of it. Marathons are a unique part of running.” She also liked the “everyone’s a winner” mentality of marathons, focusing not so much about who crosses the finish line first, but more about just crossing the line and achieving your own personal goal.

Erin had many influences throughout her running career. Older teammates and coaches had a major impact on her as well as a solid network of support. But her number one influence has been her parents, Gerri and Bill Sprague. She states that they are both “incredible people and I probably don’t tell them that enough. They’ve pushed me to do the best that I could, no matter what I did or what crazy ideas I had.” Her parents echo the sentiment, “We, as parents, cannot help but wonder where she found the inspiration for this endeavor. We do know she has always set goals for herself and worked hard to achieve them. We are very proud of her for the person she has become. We also are grateful for the healthy lifestyle she has pursued with her running, and all the good people it has lead her to associate with. Erin has inspired her family and others, who have heard her story, that it is pos-

sible to do something you love, while also doing something great to help others.”

The outside support has been strong too. In the Running has set a goal of raising \$70,000 to donate to the selected charities and have so far received \$65,000. They will be continuing to accept donations throughout the summer and early fall, before handing over the money in late fall. One-hundred percent of all donations go to the charities, and will be divided evenly among the seven organizations.

Despite the various challenges along the way, this journey has provided some very memorable experiences. Besides the honor of meeting the exceptional activists along the way, Erin was pleased to run in Beijing where the Olympics would be held. She experienced many different cultures, and was even able to try a little tango at the birthplace of the famous dance in Argentina, while on her way down to Antarctica. “I could run,” she says, “but I could never do tango! It was really cool to experience that and forget that I was on my way to the challenges in Antarctica.”

Her most memorable adventure, though, was her trip to Africa. Accompanied by her younger brother, her boyfriend and his brother, she was able to involve her family in the effort. While she ran the Kilimanjaro Marathon in Tanzania, the boys ran the 5K. Afterwards, they all climbed Mount Kilimanjaro together. Erin was honored to have her brother on his first trip abroad with her, which allowed him to have a further understanding of how different people live in the world. “It was very special to watch him have this experience.”

Erin has enjoyed watching others jump into the project as well. “I wanted to motivate people to set challenges and view sports in a different way. It is exciting to see people, not necessarily runners coming out and doing this.” With this goal in mind, In the Running is beginning to expand their outreach and is offering more opportunities for other runners to

join the cause. As the group grows, they will likely increase the number of causes they are supporting, in order to enable participants to run for organizations that are important to them.

On July 6, 2008, at 6:50 in the morning, Erin ran her last record-breaking race. When asked what was running through her head as she neared the finish line, Erin said that in the last seven kilometers of the race, “I tried to think about each race in the order I ran them. I thought of the people I met along the way. I was hurting by the end, but I just couldn’t believe it... I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, this is it, it’s over. I can’t believe I made it!’” Once the paperwork is accredited, she will have the official Guinness World Record as the youngest woman to run a marathon on all seven continents.

So what’s next for this incredible young woman – a little time off? Not likely! “It’s been a week of not running and I’m already going a little crazy!” she said. After a little rest, Erin would like to try a triathlon. “You have to keep challenging yourself to do new activities and something difficult.”

In a society that often says you’re crazy when you have a lofty goal in mind, and that it can never be done, Erin has proven that it can. Her advice to others that have a crazy goal they would like to achieve – sports-related or otherwise – rings true for all aspects of life: “You just have to set out and do it. I think it was Woody Allen who said that ‘80-percent of success is showing up.’ It’s all about attitude, so be confident and say this is something I can do. Believe in yourself and your training. Use your support group and just go for it!”

To learn more about In the Running, the charitable organizations, getting involved, or donating, go to intherunning.org. ▲

Jenna Caputo (silverpenproductions.com) is a freelance writer and ballroom dance instructor in Ballston Spa. Jenna also enjoys yoga, cross-country skiing and curling.