



Volunteering for the Army Ten-Miler

Even after nearly 20 years of working the water tables, Mary Lynn Stevens hasn't quite perfected the art of passing the cup.

“Of course you get drenched (by the end of the race),” said Stevens, recounting some of the pitfalls of being an Army Ten-Miler volunteer. “They’ll grab the cup and you don’t let go of it quite fast enough and it ends up all over both of you.”

But a little water never hurt anyone and Stevens continues to return year after year to support the runners on race day.

“These men and women and their families have sacrificed so much for us,” said Stevens. “It’s a payback. It’s a way for us to say ‘Thank you’ and I think that’s very important.”

Stevens is just one of about 1,200 volunteers that turn out every year for the Army Ten-Miler and the pre-race Expo. From working the hundreds of water tables that line the course to passing out t-shirts at packet pick-up to directing spectators, civilian and military volunteers alike make it possible for the race to run smoothly.

Stevens, who works for the Pentagon Federal Credit Union Foundation, got involved with the Army Ten-Miler in the early 1990s when she was working in the marketing department of the Credit Union. Back then, she was helping her co-workers get involved in the community (“It was sort of a volunteer job to my job,” she explained.).

When the opportunity to volunteer at the Army Ten-Miler came across her desk, “I thought ‘Well, this is perfect.’ Our jobs are focused on serving people in the military. This is the race for us. We can extend our services and get involved on a face-to-face basis with the people we’re helping.”

That very first year of volunteering Stevens and her co-workers were assigned the water tables at mile marker four (right around the corner from the Lincoln Memorial) and have been working those tables ever since.

Being a volunteer takes commitment. Many have to arrive even before the runners. Stevens and her crew of about 30 to 40 volunteers, for example, usually arrive before 6 a.m. to start filling up thousands of water cups and getting ready for the runners to pass them by.

The early morning wake-up call may be tough, but once the race gets underway, it’s well worth it, said Stevens.



“It’s just the best race we’ve ever been involved with,” she said. “Everyone is just so polite. I’ve never been called ma’am by so many people – and everybody says thank you when you give them the water.”

Volunteers also get to act as a supplemental cheering section alongside the spectators.

“We always cheer for the runners...you see everybody has their t-shirts from their various units. Everybody’s in such a good mood. Even when you get toward the end of the pack and you see the people who are not the best trained runners who are struggling, we’ll cheer them on,” Stevens said. “One year, one runner came up to me and gave me a big kiss and then ran on. It was one of the guys I knew from Walter Reed.”

But perhaps the volunteer with the best vantage point for watching the runners is Jimmy Willis.

Willis, who’s been volunteering with the race since the Military District of Washington took charge 13 years ago, is perched in the announcer’s booth by the finish line each year.



Armed with a walkie talkie, Willis communicates with another volunteer that’s stationed on the course near the finish line. He let’s Willis know the bib number of each runner that’s approaching, and in turn Willis relays this information to someone with a laptop who looks up the runner’s information. The announcer can then let the spectators know the name and important stats of who is crossing the finish line.

“I think it’s great because I get to see who’s coming,” said Willis of his coveted volunteer position. “No matter what they’re condition, almost of the runners are giving 150 percent to get across the finish line...the crowd is cheering and clapping and you’ve got so many people at the finish line hollering and screaming urging their runners to hurry.”

Willis also volunteers at the Expo the weekend of the race, coordinating the distribution of the t-shirts to all the runners.

“That’s a major undertaking. People don’t realize it,” he said. “We pass out anywhere from 20,000 to 24,000 t-shirts.”

Willis, who is retired Army, works as an information insurance officer for the Military District of Washington – which is how he got involved with the race all those years ago.



“I wanted to get involved from day one. I look forward to seeing the same volunteers come back every year,” said Willis, who works with many of the same volunteers at the t-shirt booth year after year.

Just like all those years before, Willis and Stevens both will return to their volunteer posts this 25th Anniversary year to support the race. And just like the previous years, Stevens and Willis – along with hundreds of other volunteers – will also be there to cheer on each and every single runner.

“The wheelchairs (and other Wounded Warriors) come by first and everyone cheers. Then the elite athletes. They usually don’t stop for water because it’s too early in the race and they’re running too fast. Then the bulk of the runners come by and we’re very busy,” recounted Stevens. “It’s an exhilarating experience.”