

Going the Distance

Longtime runner honors her late dog with a myHumane fundraiser—and one more extraordinary feat

by Michael Sharp



Marlene Cmons with Watson

for me, through everything. Whatever I had to deal with in my life, she was just a constant. She was just a loving, never-complaining constant."

In the days that followed, Cmons felt the urge to pay tribute somehow. That led her to myHumane, an online program through which individuals can raise money to help The HSUS protect animals.

It's designed to be fun: Past participants have gathered donations through birthday parties, bar mitzvahs, even Halloween costume parties. Cmons opted to add a personal challenge as well: She wanted to honor Hershey by continuing to run.

And so, at the age of 69, she set out to run her first marathon in 14 years.

"Trust me, I had not planned to run another marathon in my lifetime," says Cmons, whose voice still tightens when she talks about Hershey: "I felt like I needed to do something, in a way, to say thank you to her for the tremendous gift she was in my life. And also to say thank

MARLENE CIMONS took off running with her chocolate Lab, Hershey. That was their ritual, morning after morning, in the hopeful darkness of the 5 o'clock hour.

This time, though, they would make it just 100 yards.

Cmons figures her feet or maybe her legs must have gotten tangled in the leash. She tumbled down. She smacked her face hard on the pavement.

In the blur of the moment, she remembers holding onto the leash, but had Hershey

wanted to "make a leap for freedom," it would've been easy for her to break away.

But she didn't.

"She turned around and came back and licked my face," Cmons says. "She knew that I was in trouble, and she came back to me. That's the bond. You know what I mean? They always come back to you. ... They're just always there for you."

For more than a decade, that's the way it was—Cmons and her "great girl" Hershey. Through so much.

But on Feb. 4 of last year, 16 days shy of her 13th birthday, Hershey suddenly couldn't stand up. Cmons had a neighbor help carry her to the car. They drove from Maryland to a specialist in northern Virginia, where X-rays revealed an aggressive tumor on her spine.

Cmons was forced to make a wrenching decision. "It was definitely the worst day of my life. Absolutely the worst day," she says.

"She was my best friend, she really was. ... She just was there

you to The Humane Society for the work that it does. Because it supports all animals."

Cimons set up an online fundraising page through *my humane.org*. She included a photo of Hershey—the "eternal puppy," with her kind eyes and graying fur around her mouth. She wrote about her dog, her plans for the marathon and the many problems facing animals today: puppy mills, factory farms, fighting rings.

"That is why, before I cross the finish line, I'm hoping to raise a ton of money for the HSUS," she wrote, later signing off: "Yours in running and in love of animals, Marlene."

She set her goal at \$2,500.

"It's really interesting because people will give," says Cimons, a writer and adjunct journalism professor at the University of Maryland. "Even people I didn't expect to give surprised me."

She emailed just about everyone on her contacts list. If she didn't hear back, she'd follow up again weeks later. "The worst that can happen is they'll ignore you. And some people did." But at the same time: "I was amazed at the people who responded." Down the stretch, she sent new messages like, "I'm only \$300 from my goal, help bring me over the top."

Two of the vets who treated Hershey donated. So too did many of her running friends. "Turns out," she says, "they're all animal lovers."

Cimons hit her goal and then some, raising more than \$3,000 in memory of Hershey. (As part of her efforts, she also raised \$1,500 for Lab Rescue of the L.R.C.P., a group based outside of Washington, D.C.)

Of course, there was still that small matter of running 26.2 miles.

"I knew how much it was

going to hurt," says Cimons, who had run 11 previous marathons—the last one in 2000 in New York City.

She wasn't worried about finishing; rather, she was worried about her time. Marine Corps Marathon runners must "beat the bridge"—making it 20 miles to the 14th Street Bridge in Washington, D.C., with at least a pace of 14 minutes per mile, or they're shuttled back to the finish line.

There was a time when that wasn't a challenge: In six previous marathons, Cimons finished in less than 4 hours. In her best one, she averaged 8 minutes, 33 seconds per mile *throughout the entire race*. But: "Apparently

after the age of 65, you really slow down. It just happens to everybody."

Still, she pushed on. Running sprints around the track at American University. Waking up early to do hours-long practice runs before the summer heat took hold of the day.

Along the way, she adopted a black Lab who'd been found wandering the streets, covered in fleas and ticks. She named him Watson, and a day after his arrival, she took him running. ("A lot of bobbing and weaving," she says, laughing. "You have to teach him how to run, and we're still working on it.")

Finally, on Oct. 26, wearing a gray T-shirt that read "Animals

Matter," battling searing pains in her feet, Cimons did in fact "beat the bridge"—with a cool 40 minutes to spare.

She likes to run with her head down, in her own world. Like all of those predawn jogs alone with Hershey, and now Watson. But as she approached the end, she lifted her eyes to take in the moment.

"I feel exhilarated every time I finish a marathon, no matter how bad it is—no matter how much pain I'm in, no matter how hard it's been along the way. And, yes, I thought about Hershey as I crossed that finish line. I thought, 'Oh, my sweet girl, you would be so proud of me. I did this for you.'"

Tips For Your Campaign



Throw a party! Run a race! There are many fun ways to help animals through an online fundraising campaign. Get started at humanesociety.org/myhumane.

MAKE THE FIRST DONATION once your fundraising page is live online, says Bailey Fogarty, who oversees the *myHumane* program for The HSUS. "It proves you are committed and gets your campaign going!"

ADD A PERSONAL TOUCH, says Eric Lagally of Seattle, who raised \$960 running the Portland Marathon in October. He took suggested email language from *myHumane.org* and worked it into individually crafted greetings and messages. "These are my friends, these are my coworkers, these are my family," he says, "so I don't want to have them feel like they're getting spam."

ASK FOR DONATIONS IN LIEU OF GIFTS

if you throw a party, suggests Charlene Zeiberg, whose daughters Brianna and Shira have raised nearly \$18,000 through events such as birthday and Halloween parties. Another idea: Tell a local business you'll patronize them for your party if they can donate a portion of the proceeds back to your cause. For 10-year-old Shira, that cause is fighting puppy mills, "because I really like dogs, and I don't like to see them in cages all the time."

CREATE A PRINTOUT TO DISTRIBUTE

and be well-versed in your cause, notes 13-year-old Gabie Nealon-Shapiro of Manhattan, who raised \$1,557 for the HSUS Protect Seals campaign through her bat mitzvah. Her invitations included a card detailing how she hoped to protect seals and how guests could help. "The plight of the seals really touched my heart," she says, "and I knew I had to do something about it."

DON'T BE SHY

says Zavia Menning of Oviedo, Florida, who raised \$1,270 through her college graduation and 22nd birthday party. "Dream big, because the sky is the limit. ... Almost everyone I ask loves animals and will tell you a powerful reason why. Most people care, and they just need to be inspired to action—by you!"

