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Sinthy Kounlasa: Going As Far As She Can Go

By Nick Gosling, Media Relations

Sinthy Kounlasa stands in starting coral 11, the number 11677 across her chest. More than 17,000 runners surround her at the start line of the 109th Boston Marathon on West Main Street in Hopkinton, Mass. The April day is sunny and warm, 70s, perfect for running.



Sinthy Kounlasa runs the Boston Marathon.

Kounlasa has trained by running 35 to 40 miles a week since her last Boston Marathon one year ago. She has run 15-mile runs once a week. She has run 37 races since last April. Kounlasa is prepared to reach her goal, a personal record in the Boston Marathon. She has to run faster than 3:43:03, her current Boston Marathon personal record, which she set in 2002. Last year at Boston she finished in 3:48:30 despite stomach cramps.

"I'm not a fast runner," Kounlasa says. "I just want to see how far I can go."

Kounlasa has worked in the Whittemore School of Business and Economics as an administrative assistant since 1985. In her office in the top floor of McConnell a book on Buddhism sits on her shelf and a large colored map of Southeast Asia is tacked to her wall.

"They are to remind me where I came from," she says. "Because I miss home."

Home for Kounlasa is Laos in Southeast Asia. Kounlasa's childhood

Home for Kounlasa is Laos in Southeast Asia. Kounlasa's childhood there was a somber one. Her father died from rabies when she was 2. Her mother disappeared a few years later, was never found, and is presumed dead.

After the disappearance of her mother, Kounlasa and her three siblings were raised by her grandparents. Life for Kounlasa involved working hard everyday. As young as 5, she helped around the house carrying water from the river several times a day and cleaning.

Kounlasa's opportunity for formal schooling came when she was sent to live with her aunt in the city. In her aunt's home Kounlasa still had to work hard every day, helping to raise her aunt's eight children, but she had time to attend the nearby Catholic school.

For two years Kounlasa was unable to communicate with her grandparents and siblings in the countryside. When she finally earned the bus fare to return to the village, she learned that one of her brothers had died 10 days before her arrival.

As Kounlasa climbs Heartbreak Hill at mile 21 she is confident she can finish. In last year's Boston Marathon, the stomach cramps she had prevented her from waving to the fans. This year she waves back to the crowds and high-fives as many children as she can. "I was there just to enjoy their presence and wave back," she says.

During the 1970s Laos became a Communist-controlled government. Kounlasa's grandmother knew it was time for her granddaughter to leave. "She told me 'Sinthy you have to go because you need to give your children a future'," Kounlasa says. Kounlasa, her two children (3 years and 6 months), her ex-husband, and his mother fled to Thailand. In Thailand they spent 16 months in three detention camps.

In 1982, with the help of an American missionary worker, Kounlasa and her family were able to move to America. They settled in Newmarket.

Sixteen years later Kounlasa tried on her first pair of running shoes. In October 1998, Kounlasa ran her first race, the Great Island 5K in New Castle.

She soon heard about an annual road race to raise money for the St. Charles Children's Home in Rochester, which helps children of families in crisis. When Kounlasa heard that the children and nuns from St. Charles actually run the annual race, she was so inspired that she decided to make it her goal to run the race every year. In September 1999 she ran in her first St. Charles race.

"When I heard about the children's home it hit me because I lost both of my parents," she says.

Now when she runs the St. Charles race she often accompanies one of the children. She remembers the first year that she was asked to do so. Hand-in-hand Kounlasa and Kayla, a St. Charles child, ran the entire 5K race. "If I let go of her hand for just a few seconds she would say, 'No, no, give me your hand'," she says.

In her office evidence of Kounlasa's running culture isn't hard to see. Dozens of pictures of Kounlasa crossing a finish line, exhausted but

smiling triumphantly, are displayed on her desk. In the corner is a rack overflowing with running medals from the innumerable races she has run. Tucked away in her desk she keeps a binder filled with all the race numbers that she has worn, the time and date that she ran the race printed on each number. "Some day I will look back and say 'Oh my god I can't believe I ran all those'," Kounlasa says.

Kounlasa crosses the finish line of her fourth Boston Marathon on Boylston Street. With the strength she has left she looks up at the timing clock to see 3:38:56, a personal record.

Later, when Kounlasa reflects on her run, she says, "To finish is just so great anyway."

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