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SOUTH BRUNSWICK: Running in memory of fallen police officers

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Mazen Oudeh told himself he was done running marathons.

The 41-year-old Princeton Gate resident had been running the 26-mile New York City Marathon races since 2003 and finally said enough.

But when the Port Authority Police Department came calling and asked him to join their team in the marathon to honor those lost in the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks, he couldn't say no.

Mr. Oudeh, who works as a civil engineer for the Port Authority, had run in six previous marathons before making the decision to give them up. But he broke his own vow when asked to help commemorate fellow Port Authority employees.

"I did my first marathon in 2003, and I'd been doing one every year until I finally said no more," Mr. Oudeh said. "Until the Port Authority police said they were putting a team together and were trying to get 37 runners to commemorate the 37 Port Authority police, who died on 9/11. So, I said, 'well, it's back to running,' and I joined the team."

Mr. Oudeh, who was born in Hillside and moved to South Brunswick in 2007, first began running in 2002 as a way of getting in shape.

"I started running just to lose weight," he said. "I was really overweight, and that's a good way to lose it."

Mr. Oudeh started small, running three miles a day before he built up his endurance for longer runs.

"I had a friend who said 'let's run a marathon,' and I said, 'that's a crazy goal, maybe someday,'" he said. "But it only took a year before I ran a marathon in New Jersey in 2003."

Mr. Oudeh ran three marathons in New Jersey, the first two in 2003 and 2004, starting in Sandy Hook and ending in Long Branch, then in 2007 in Long Branch. Though he ran the New York City Marathon once before in 2006 with a time of three hours and 39 minutes, Mr. Oudeh said it didn't match the feeling of running for such an important team and honoring lives lost in the line of duty during the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

"I've worked here since 1990, and I see these people all the time," he said. "You definitely want people to know they didn't die for no reason. They were a critical part of our family here."

Mr. Oudeh said no other race he's participated in can compare with the feeling of running with more than 40,000 people with thousands of spectators screaming for you the whole way.

"Every step of the way, you have fans cheering you on," he said. "They can feel what you're going through and make you forget the pain. They push you because you just want to sit down, but they won't let you sit down."

Due to the huge mass of runners, Mr. Oudeh said the sight of all the people was overwhelming.

"When you reach a higher elevation, you just look down and see a sea of people all moving," he said. "It's an experience you can't have anywhere else."

As he reached the final few miles of the race, Mr. Oudeh said his body started to give a bit.

"After the 23rd mile, I felt a pain I've never had before in my hamstring," he said. "I stopped to massage my hamstring and started walking. I just said to myself, 'I can't let these people down,' and the pain stopped. I started running again and was able to finish."

Mr. Oudeh finished fifth on his team of 37 with an overall time of 4 hours and 10 minutes. He said that, after crossing the finish line, he was nauseous and exhausted, but also experienced a feeling of accomplishment.

Though he once thought he had given up marathons for good, Mr. Oudeh said he would definitely run the New York City Marathon again if he were asked by the Port Authority police to do so. The support of the crowd is something he points to as a major lifeline for all the runners and a reason for them to put their bodies through such an ordeal.

"New York City has this reputation for being very tough and rugged," Mr. Oudeh said. "But that's wrong. The people can be very friendly. The stories of how wonderful and exciting the marathon is don't compare with the real thing."

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