

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Kathrine Switzer:

I realized that, if these women had the opportunity, just the opportunity, that's all they needed. And by the time I finished the race, I said, "Okay, I'm going to be a better athlete, get my credibility together here, prove myself, play by their rules, whatever they are, and change those rules." I wanted women to know how great you can feel when you're running. As long as I ran, I felt empowered, I felt like I could

John Boccacino:

Before Title IX, of course.

Kathrine Switzer:

Yeah. But not just running, there was no field hockey, no lacrosse, nothing, nothing. So, I said, "Okay, I'm going to run," so I asked the coach if I could run on the men's cross-country team. And he said, "No, it's against NCAA rules but you can come out and work out with the team if you'd like to." And I said, "Well, fine, Coach, where do you go?" and he said, "Drumlins," I said, "Okay, well, I'll see you tomorrow." And just before I closed the door, I heard him burst out laughing and say to his colleagues, "I think I got rid of that one." I was so upset because I said, "Well, what am I going to do now? Am I really welcome or I'm not welcome?" And I said, "No, I'm going to show up. He said I would be welcome, I'm going to show up," and I went out there. I was very nervous, very nervous. And you know what happened? All the guys on the team came running over to me and saying, "Wow, we'd never had a girl before, this is great."

And one guy in particular was Arnie Briggs, a volunteer coach, he was the university mailman but he had been an ex-marathoner and now he was injured and older, he is 50. He said, "We've never had a girl here before and I've been training with this team for 31 years. I'm now just a volunteer helping out with the

Yeah. So, showed up at Boston ready to run, it was pouring cold, freezing rain and snow. It was a real Syracuse day but it was the worst day in the history of the Boston Marathon in terms of weather before and up to 2018 when they had a hurricane, the absolute worst day, miserable conditions and everybody was really getting hypothermia and everything else. But at any rate, I started the race, again, the men were welcoming to me and, about a mile and a half into the race, the press truck went by, went crazy seeing a girl in the race and I was so proud of myself and Arnie was proud of me and my boyfriend had come along from the track team and he was a hammer thrower but, if a girl could run, he could run.

And then came the official's truck and on the official's truck was the race directors and the race director completely lost his temper. He jumped off the bus and ran after me and attacked me in the race and tried to rip off my bib numbers and started screaming at me, "Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers," and calling me other names, "Get out of my race. Na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na, na." And Arnie was trying to bat him away and it was really ... And this was right in front of the press truck, okay? And I was in tears, I was trying to get away from him and he was pulling me by the sweatshirt when my hammer-throwing boyfriend threw a crossbody block into him and sent him out of the race, boom, on the side of the road. And then Coach Arnie said, "Run like hell," and down the street we went. Now, you know what, John, you're laughing-

John Boccacino:

Well, I-

Kathrine Switzer:

Okay. No, no. See, ithe tBDC iagnear gs /tg to get a1,bib/MCID 5 s>truck and on thJohn Boccacino:

said, "I'm not trying to prove anything, I'm just here to run," and I'm going ... God, I was only 20 years old and they were so harassing that I just looked down and then I said, "You might as well go to the front because I'm not dropping out of the race." And finally, they left me and I turned to Arnie and I said, "I'm going to finish this race in my hands and my knees if I have to because everybody's telling women they can't do it and then they pull opportunities away from them so we can't prove otherwise."

And in those days, try to imagine this, 1967, you weren't even allowed to enter or apply to Harvard or any of the Ivy League schools and how are you going to get a law degree and compete with somebody who has a Harvard law degree? Then they say we were giving women opportunities but they can't do it anyway. Well, of course you can't do it if somebody's going to try to rip your number off, right?

John Boccacino:

Yeah.

Kathrine Switzer:

Anyway, I went on, I finished the race, I forgave the official someplace around 21 miles when I didn't have any emotions left, I realized he was a product of his time, that was his problem, and that I was going to have to make some changes in his attitude and other attitudes. Again, the guys in the race were wonderful, very supportive and then I was thinking, "Well, why aren't other women here? What's the problem?" And I was cynical about it, I said, "Women just not getting it," and then I realized, hey, come on, you had parents who encouraged you, you had a cross-country team who encouraged, you had Arnie and that made all the difference. And suddenly I realized that if these women had the opportunity, just the opportunity, that's all they needed. And by the time I finished the race, I said, "Okay, I'm going to be a better athlete, get my credibility together here, prove myself, play by their rules, whatever they are, and change those rules."

John Boccacino:

The series of photos that the Boston Herald put out there, they're iconic, they were part of Times 100 Most Memorable Photos. How much did the visual component of what you went through help to really with the groundswell of changing minds and changing perspectives on this?

Kathrine Switzer:

and Herald 240d finally, eall s? y, eall s

learned how to do race direction, I put on a race every Tuesday night, learned how to get sponsorship, learned how to get prizes, not prize money, but prizes and sponsorships, and then learned how to work the regulations. Sat out my little time with the Athletic Federation, came back, took a leadership role and decided I would make change from within which you need to do. So, that led to then creating the work to get to the Olympic Games which we can talk about.

John Boccacino:

A lot of people, when faced with their darkest moment, you have the two choices. Are you going to fight or are you going to fight? And you chose to fight and it's so applaudable what you did because, eventually, your persistence led to the women's marathon being admitted to the Summer Olympics in 1984 and the groundswell and popularity of running. What was your thought process? Why did you take that option and say I'm not going to let what happened to me happen to other people who want to follow in my footsteps?

Kathrine Switzer:

Because it was wrong. I was raised by parents who said you know right from wrong so go for what's right. And I knew it was going to be very time-consuming and discouraging and a lot of cat calling, the hate mail I received was not nice but I received really good mail so I threw that hate mail away and kept a

and he said, "That wouldn't be a problem." And that's when I learned you should ask for what you're worth. I had no idea that I could earn \$30,000 and I thought, "Oh, my God, am I up to the job?" Suddenly self-doubt and I said, "You're up to the job." I went in there, we launched that thing, short story now. Eventually, we had races in 27 countries for over a million women, 400 races, it was a huge global program. And I took it to places like Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, they'd never even had women's sports much less open road race, the women came by the thousands.

John Boccacino:

Ooh.

Kathrine Switzer:

Yeah. And so, now I had the data and statistics to present to the International Olympic Committee. We had the participation, we had the sponsorship, we were on media all over the place and we had performances and we had the international representation that they essentially had to vote when those federations voted and they voted in the women's marathon in 1981 for the '84 games by a vote to nine to one. So, there we go.

John Boccacino:

And I love the fact that ... And I mentioned earlier, you talked about opportunities for women, giving them the equal ground. Running for you, I see the smile light up and your eyes light up when you talk about running on the race. What is it about running for you that has been just so rewarding and so fulfilling?

Kathrine Switzer:

It's given me everything. Everybody, they ask the question what is the number one thing, I'll just say, listen, running has given me just about everything. It's given me my religion, it's given me my husband, it's given me my travel, my job, my perspective but the biggest thing I think it has given me, my health, my wellness and all that kind of stuff, but the biggest single thing is it's given me me. It's given a perspective on myself and given me empowerment and belief in myself and that's what everybody in the world is lacking at some time where they are and say, "Oh, my God, can I do that?" and I just go out for a long run and take a deep breath, yeah, you can do this. So, it is quite miraculous and it's easy and it's cheap.

John Boccacino:

And anybody can do it anywhere.

Kathrine Switzer:

Anybody can do it anywhere.

John Boccacino:

Well, I love too the fact the humble origins of ... Because, really, you could say that your running career did start here at Syracuse when you were working with the cross-country team and Arnie and everything and I want to bring this back to the Syracuse connection for a second. What drew you to Syracuse to study journalism, to study English and then go on and get the public relations master's degree?

Kathrine Switzer:

Well, what drove me to come to Syracuse was the following. First of all, in high school, I was the first graduating class so we were the first all the way through for four years. And when I first went into this high school, I wanted to work on a high school newspaper and I wanted to write sports because the women weren't getting any coverage, the girls were not getting any coverage and we actually had a field

so ashamed and embarrassed and they were humiliating me and my father said, "You start something, honey, you finish it," and so definitely did so that was really, really important to me. Another thing is it was my dad who started me running because I wanted to be a high school cheerleader, whoo. My dad said, "Oh, honey, you don't want to do that, life is to participate, not to spectate and you shouldn't cheer for other people, people should cheer for you." And I said, "Well, Dad," and he said, "Your school has something new, it's called a field hockey team and, if you ran a mile a day, you'd be the best player on the team." He was a very motivating guy.

And I said, "I can't run a mile," and he said, "Sure you can, you can go right now and you can run a mile." And I said, "I can't," and he said, "Come on, I'll show you." We went outside, measured the yard, seven laps, he said, "Okay, just do it, just try it," and I took off and he said, "No, no, no, go slow. It's not about fast, it's about finishing the job." I remember all these things. And so, when I finished, I said, "Dad, I did it, I did a mile," and he said, "Yeah, now you do it every day."

John Boccacino:

That lesson clearly stuck with you though too.

Kathrine Switzer:

They do, they do, yeah.

John Boccacino:

And I love hearing the beginnings of where people come from and what shaped their careers that they take on and I love what you've done with 261 Fearless, the fact that you've got more than 5,000 women, girls of all ages, of all backgrounds, all abilities coming together. You mentioned this earlier but what do you think is the biggest impact that 261 Fearless has had in the ways of empowering and lifting up other women through running?

Kathrine Switzer:

John, it's an early question because we're really only 10 years old and we're in 13 countries already. This is a non-profit and non-profits, foundations, et cetera, really only reach their fullness after a couple of decades so we are on the right track which is terrific. So, the influence we've already have is we have proved that, regardless of your age, your ability or your background or whatever, if you could get out and put one foot in front of the other, you're going to become empowered. If you want to lift a woman up, just show her how to run but she needs a friend. And women, we look at all the modern women out running, there are thousands and thousands of them but there are so many women who are isolated or restricted by religious convention or social convention or cultural mores or the old myths that I grew up with which is, if you run, your uterus is going to fall out so you're terrified. Do I really want to run or get big legs and turn into a man? Those are all the things they told us and those myths still exist.

And so, you say, okay, well, how are you going to reach these women? Well, you need to do it at the grassroots level and you need to take them by the hand and say, "Hey, look, this isn't about being competitive, it's just about come out and have a jog or a walk with us and go get coffee or something afterwards." And yet, these women who are taking you by the hand, they are trained coaches so we have them as, really, people who know how to do that and reach out to them. And we are going to work and we are working village by village, city by city, country by country and just going in at the grassroots level and the word spreads. My dream, after getting the women's marathon in the Olympic Games, I remember I was doing the TV broadcast by that time, another Newhouse score. I came out of the stadium and said, "Okay, we did that. We got the women's marathon in the Olympic Games," at 90,000 people screaming and 2.2 billion viewers, unbelievable, that'll change the world I said.

It was only about a week later you hit that postpartum funk and I thought, "Oh, that's really great for women who can train and go to a race. How about those women who they're under a burka in Afghanistan or North Africa or they're isolated in their home with domestic abuse? How are we going to reach those women?" And suddenly, that old bib number, 261, became a number meaning fearless in the face of adversity and it absolutely went viral. People were telling me it's changing my life, I'm taking courage from you and what it really means is that they need a symbol to make something happen and that's what inspired us to create the non-profit 261 Fearless. Not a business, a non-profit.

John Boccacino:

Absolutely. And 261 Fearless is ... And the fact that the bib number ... Is it even possible to comprehend you didn't enter the Boston Marathon looking to make history but, out of that troubling moment, just how much good has come from that?

Kathrine Switzer:

I know but from the worst things can come the best things and that's what I'm going to be telling the class today. I said, "If something is wrong, there's an opportunity to change it, that we can then reverse it. You look at what's the solution to this? Let's do the solution."

John Boccacino:

Well, the last question I have for you, Kathrine, and I'm so grateful for you making the time, you've had such a lovely story to share with our audience here. You're talking to students coming up here for fall classes, you obviously love running and you love Syracuse. If somebody asked you to define what does it mean to be an alumna of Syracuse University, what would you say?

Kathrine Switzer:

I would say that it is a very powerful thing and that it is ... I was going to say a sisterhood and a brotherhood. It is a very important friendship and network and a sense of unity, of purpose. And certainly, I think, in Falk, which is a new school relatively and it's Syracuse but growing wildly and powerfully into something that is educating students for a universal language. Sports is a universal language, sports doesn't need Spanish, English, whatever. You're watching a soccer game, you know what's going on here. And running is a universal language and so, through this universal language, I think getting an education that enhances that understanding globally is going to only increase the luster of Syracuse University.

John Boccacino:

I'd be remiss, I have one more question that I think you'll appreciate me asking you before we wrap up here. Tell our audience about the work you're hoping to achieve with the university, our library and our archives.

Kathrine Switzer:

Oh, boy, I had a wonderful meeting this morning with them and I have ... I guess I'm a hoarder at a certain point but I couldn't bear to give up any of the videos or film or writing or the brochures and all the work we had done leading to get the women's marathon in particular into the Olympic Games and I kept it all. And my husband, very, very gratefully to me, went down to my basement and at least put them in boxes by year. But there is a ton of material and it's now very valuable and I'm hoping that the acquisition and my gift of all of that material to Syracuse University Library will result in probably the biggest collection and best collection of women's running history, marathon history anyway, distance running in the world. And it is a joy to think that it will be public accessible which I think is everybody's ambition.

John Boccacino:

It's really a treasure trove of memories to go down and share it with the future generations because we need to keep telling these stories of overcoming adversity and, again, I can't thank you enough. Kathrine Switzer has been our guest here on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast, a revolutionary trailblazing pioneer who is humble as can be too. We've really enjoyed your stories, thank you so much, Kathrine.

Kathrine Switzer:

Thank you, John, great to be here. Go Orange.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.