

The Last Five Miles

by **Ronda Einbinder**

Rusty Martinez was not feeling well as he neared the last five miles of the Sacramento Cow Town Marathon. His heart was beating fast and his legs were slowing down from exhaustion. As the miles crawled by, he told himself that this was his goal and that there might never be another opportunity to run a marathon. As he struggled to keep up with the other runners, he was energized by his determination, knowing that five years earlier he would never have dreamed that a day like this could be possible.

Rustico Zervoulakos Martinez II moved to the United States from his native Philippines when he was three years old; his parents wanted to escape the turmoil caused when President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in the country. His aunt sponsored the family and they settled in the Northern California city of Vallejo.

The third of four kids, Rusty began to gain weight rapidly at the age of five while his siblings remained average size. "When I was five, I came down with pneumonia and almost died," Rusty recalled. "They gave me medicine that may have affected my eating habits. I gained 50 pounds that first year."

A socially active child throughout his school years, Rusty was involved in student council, played basketball and tried various other sports. As his weight escalated to over 100 pounds in elementary school, 300 pounds in junior high and 400 pounds in high school, Rusty found it difficult to participate in many school activities.

"I played basketball and tried to be athletic, but with weight issues it was not something that I could excel in," Rusty remembered. "I always tried to do my best, but I was always the big kid who they brought in to follow up the defense. One time in high school, I tried to go out for the football team, but my head would not fit into the helmet. I lost 25 pounds, but my head was still too big for me to join the team."

Rusty felt like an outcast at his small parochial high school. He was rarely invited to social functions and felt the glares of students behind his back. In 1988, Rusty accepted his diploma and never looked back as he walked away from his childhood years.

Rusty entered a new chapter in his life by enrolling at Dominican College in San Rafael. He had received his fine arts degree and was working toward a teaching credential when he got a phone call that would change his life. "My mom had colon cancer that she had fought for two years, but after I graduated from college, her cancer returned," Rusty said. "I put my life on hold while I helped her out and watched her die. After that, I did not have the heart to go back to teaching. She died the same day Nicole Brown Simpson was murdered."

Rusty and his mother had a very special bond, and she had always been there to defend her second son when she saw people ridiculing him. Rusty's aunt knew how important it had been to his mother that Rusty lose weight. She sent Rusty to a program in North Carolina called the Structure House, where he remained for two months. "They teach you how to eat and deal with the psychology of what is causing you to eat," Rusty explained. "It was very successful because I was in an environment that was planned out for me. It was not a real-life environment. I lost 60 pounds in two months because I did not have to work or cook meals."

Rusty left Structure House weighing 320 pounds, but after he returned home, he found the weight climbing back up. In 1994, Rusty's brother-in-law helped him get a job at a bank call center, and he worked there for the next six years. By 2000, Rusty weighed over 500 pounds. "I knew that I was intelligent, but I also knew it would be difficult to try and get a new job because of my weight issues." When Rusty discovered that the sickness he was feeling was caused by diabetes, Rusty and his doctor decided that weight loss surgery might be the best solution.

"I had to jump through many hoops and see a dietician and a psychologist with Kaiser," Rusty said. "They were not doing the surgery at the time, so I was sent to San Diego and had an open Roux-en-Y performed by Dr. Leo Murphy in July 2001."

He weighed 465 pounds at the time of surgery. After the surgery, Rusty began losing 30 pounds a week, and he weighed 315 pounds one year later.

After being laid off from work in 2003, Rusty decided to pack up and move down to Southern California to be near his best friend Bill Beeman.

Joining a local gym and becoming a regular in a step aerobics class enabled Rusty to begin getting his health back. He soon realized that he did not have much of a social life between his new job and the hours he spent at the gym. One night after work, Rusty decided to join Bill on a nightly run. Running soon became an important part of Rusty's life, and he began running three times a week. After Bill gave him a membership to a local running club, Rusty found himself in better cardiac shape than ever before.

Pushing running to the next level, Rusty decided to run the Disneyland half-marathon, but he achieved his goal before the date of the race. So, taking his goal to the next step, Rusty signed up for the Sacramento Cow Town Marathon in October 2006.

"The Wednesday before the weekend of the race, I found myself in excruciating pain and it was discovered that I had a blockage in my bypass," Rusty explained. "I drove myself to the ER and they gave me morphine for the pain. I immediately said to the doctor, 'I have a marathon to run on Sunday. Will I be all right?'"

The doctors discovered that the blockage had disappeared by that Friday. Rusty was very determined to run the marathon that he had spent six months training for.

"I was released from the hospital Friday evening, went home to take a shower, began my drive



to Sacramento and arrived there at 4:30 in the morning," Rusty said. "I was not going to push it, but I knew I was able to do this."

His determination paid off. "The last five miles, my legs were getting heavy, but I was determined," Rusty said with pride. "I had so many people supporting me. I was just so lucky to be in this situation."

What is next for Rusty? "I would like to do a mini-triathlon next summer in Huntington Beach and just plan on continuing to run. And, of course, I am enjoying my new job at ObesityHelp."

With the support of his running club and his family and friends, there is no doubt that Rusty will reach his next goal.

For more information about Rusty, please visit his profile at www.ObesityHelp.com/member/rustimart