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Less than three years ago, Schneider was living on the streets, battling drug and alcohol addiction. This spring, she won a marathon.

By Tania Haas

Her training regime is simple. After working an overnight shift, she sleeps as much as possible, eats a balanced meal, and runs around Guelph, Ont. with a 30-lb. pack strapped to her back. Those simple steps led to a first place women’s finish at the 2015 Waterloo Marathon.

It was Jennifer-Lynn Schneider’s first marathon.

Training is a straightforward routine for the 29-year-old whose early life was filled with complications. Less than three years ago, Schneider was living on the streets, battling drug and alcohol addiction.

Today, her habits are running and competition. Where so-called friends once brought her down, her new cohorts lift her up and cheer her on. Schneider has gone from homeless to a Boston Marathon hopeful.

“When I qualified for Boston this year while working 12-hour shifts five days a week, well, that blew people away,” says Schneider, who is 5’2” and 115 lb. She finished Waterloo in 3:29:34.

“I don’t come from a running background or a running family. I was kicked out of my house at 15. Both of my parents were alcoholics. I grew up on junk food,” says Schneider.

After high school, she fell into the unfortunate family tradition. “There was this idea that if you had a drink or had some weed, you’d feel better,” says Schneider. Her early 20s were spent drifting in and out of substance abuse, surrounded by others doing the same. Today, that life is far behind her.

“I’ve learned a lot in the last few years,” says Schneider. “I’ve changed for the better.”

“When she first came to us, she had significant needs. She needed help with food and clothing,” says Karen Kamphuis, executive director of Lakeside Hope House, a social support organization in Guelph.

“When you live below the poverty line, so much of your energy, mindset, and resources go into having a roof over your head and clothes on your back,” Kamphuis points out.

“For Jen to be in that position and say, ’I can run and I can train,’ and set for herself that goal is huge. It is so seldom that we see this type of achievement.”

Community support worker Lisa Laws met Schneider at Hope House in late 2013. “When I first met her, she was sleeping at the gym so she could stay warm and dry. She had just started to run and had realized that she was pretty good,” Schneider says. “She was running in the same worn-out clothes day after day, so I bought her some running tights and a top.” Schneider’s reaction was telling of her burgeoning commitment to the sport. “It was like I had given her the world,” says Laws.

Schneider became more focused, every
day, on running. “She put everything she had into it,” Laws says. “Everyone she knew could see the positive changes in her from week to week. It was fantastic to see.” The two have since developed a friendship. “Her determination is awesome. I’m so proud of her.”

The original inspiration came at once. Late for work one January day in 2013, she ran six kilometres with a 30 lb. pack on her back. She realized she had endurance. She also noticed that she felt better. Her mind raced less, and she felt more at ease. A few days later, waking up on a friend’s couch, she decided to change her life – she decided to train for her first race.

The Guelph Lake Try-a-Tri was six months away. Schneider quit smoking and started running to work. But it was the dead of winter, and she was still homeless. She snuck naps in school gyms and spent nights on cafeteria tables before security showed up. By springtime, she was training on a heavy, beat-up old bicycle. On race day, she cycled 5k to the venue, raced, and then cycled back home. She finished second in her age group. Over the next year and a half, she competed in another try-a-tri, three half-marathons and multiple shorter distance races.

Amidst the training and racing, she started sleeping more and eating better. She also shed a lifestyle that was no longer her own. “I had to give up my old friends,” Schneider said. “I had to stay clear of my family as well. I can’t hang out with anyone who does what I used to do because it’s a trigger. Addictions are hard. It took a long time for me to accept that.”

Schneider can talk very fast. She has a tendency to say the same thing a number of different ways. It could be her focused intensity, but it also may be a symptom of fetal alcohol syndrome disorder (FASD), that she was only diagnosed with in her 20s. “The mind is always on the go with FASD but mine can be 10 times worse. My busy mind gets better after running or working out,” says Schneider.

In fact, she sees running as her entry point into a whole new life. “I’m hoping to make new friends in my running but I know some people are hesitant, given my background. So I’m trying to prove to them that I’m here for the long haul.”

No longer homeless, Schneider is still a regular at Hope House. At her first visit there after her Waterloo win, she was greeted by a rousing crowd of supporters. “We were all cheering and clapping,” says Kamphuis. “You just want to celebrate and capture those moments of encouragement.”

“I consider Hope House my real family,” says Schneider. “I wouldn’t be where I am without them.”

Even with two jobs – she’s a personal support worker for a client with limited mobility five days a week and she is also a registered personal trainer – Schneider still relies on economic assistance. She is one of what economists call the “working poor.”

According to a 2013 report by The Wellesley Institute, a Toronto-based think tank, Canada’s working poor are experiencing a sharper decline in health than other income levels.

“People who make sufficient incomes have relatively stable health, while people who don’t make enough have seen their health deteriorate,” says the study’s author, Sheila Block.

Schneider considers her health her most important resource. “It wasn’t until I was homeless that I met a gentleman who had a nutritional background. We talked a lot and he pretty much saved my life,” says Schneider, who says she would study nutrition, if she could afford it.

Schneider cherishes simplicity. She doesn’t own a TV or a computer, and rarely goes out. Her downtime consists of cuddling with her two cats Tigger and Nemo, nursing a recent stress fracture and reading up on fitness. Her next goal is figuring out how she’s going to get to the Boston Marathon.

Tania Haas is a Toronto-based writer and runner.