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## *Why I Run Peachtree*

**An article by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins**

I run for relationships. At dawn most Saturdays, I run the trails at Kennesaw Mountain with my buddies Jack and Dave. Occasionally we are accompanied by one or both of my sons, Justin and Andrew, both excellent runners. On our standard 10-miler, near the back side of the Cheatham Hill/Kolb Farm loop, there is a rock outcropping in a lovely grove of Beech trees. On the rock is a small, obsidian stone, upon which is engraved these words: *Mark Edwards—Friend, Teammate, Runner*. Each week, we pause here, silently touch the rock, and run on.

We love these trails. We can be found atop Kennesaw at dawn on New Year's morning, and deep in the chilly woods, headlamps burning, on or near the winter solstice, for our annual Solstice Night Run. Throughout the year, in rain, snow, sunshine, and cerulean skies (we don't run in lightning!) we run. We've run on an icy 11 degree morning, with the sun almost an afterthought in the winter sky, and in the heat and humidity of August. We share the trails with deer, turkey, coyote, intrepid Audubon Society birders and their avian friends, horses, hikers—scouts and otherwise—and an wonderfully colorful assortment of fellow trail runners, a breed of *rara avis* unto themselves.

My first run at Kennesaw was back in the late 70's, when the Atlanta Track Club held a 6-mile race at Cheatham Hill, and it was my dear friend and Rhodes College track teammate Mark Edwards who convinced me to run there. Two years earlier, in the spring of 1977, I lamented the end of my tenure as a collegiate 400 meter runner and thus, my running career. Or, so I thought. Mark, a wonderful distance runner at Rhodes, would not hear of it. "We are running Peachtree together, and I will be your coach," he said. "In your dreams," I responded. To which he said, "Exactly...and my dreams are about to become reality." And so they did. Mark trained with me, and together we ran Peachtree in 1977, starting at the old Sears building in Buckhead and finishing downtown in the fountains at Central City (now Woodruff) Park. We continued to run Peachtree each year, and Mark helped me train for the first of my 10 marathons, the most recent of which was in Asheville on the occasion of my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday.

In February of 1992 a malignant lymph node was removed from under Mark's left arm. In April of that year, having qualified in Memphis the December before with a 2:38:00 marathon, Mark ran his final Boston Marathon. Mark had developed melanoma, and despite entering an aggressive treatment protocol at NIH, by late December of 1992, just before New Year's, he died in his beloved Memphis. Calvary Episcopal Church was filled to capacity for his funeral, including fellow runners from all over the south. He was a beautiful and fiercely competitive runner, who lost no intensity in his transition from gridiron running back to harrier, a history we shared. Mark was a courageous, beautiful, and fiercely competitive runner. And he was my friend.

In early December of that year, in a final conversation at one of our favorite places, Jagger's Pizza, Mark asked me to keep running Peachtree for both of us. And so I have. God willing, this year will be my 40<sup>th</sup> consecutive Peachtree Road Race. I run mostly trail races these days, and delight in running with my friends, and with my sons. Each run is a new adventure in what the wonderful poet Mary Oliver referred to as "*this one wild and precious life*." Donald Winnicott, the British psychoanalyst and pediatrician, believed that imagination and passion contribute a sense of aliveness—both mental and physical. "*O God*," he once wrote, "*my prayer is that I will be fully alive when I die*." For me, and for many whom I love, running is one way of being fully alive. As an Episcopal priest, professor, and pastoral counselor, it is my deep hope that we each find ways to flourish in this way, as I believe God intended.

This year, my 40<sup>th</sup> consecutive Peachtree Road Race, I will again run on behalf of the ATC Kilometer Kids. The journey down Peachtree will find me pausing at the Cathedral of St. Philip, where I am privileged to serve on the clergy staff and where I see clients at the Cathedral Counseling Center. There, my colleague Dean Sam Candler gracefully dispenses Peachtree Road Race blessings, Episcopal style, on the hill each July 4. I always delight in seeing dear friends and parishioners on the Cathedral Close. Further down Peachtree, just past the Shepherd Center and Piedmont Hospital, is the Brookwood Exchange Building, where I have seen clients and supervised our Columbia Seminary, Emory, and ITC doctoral students each Friday for many years. It is with deep gratitude that I run in memory of and on behalf of people and places so dear to me. They are touchstones for me—they are rocks in a sometimes uncertain world—and like Mark's rock on the trail at Kennesaw, they are sustaining, nourishing reminders of the gifts of grace, compassion, and relationships. I am so grateful for them all. *I run for relationships.*

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