

# Setting a Record FOR GOD

**Sister Stephanie Baliga laced up her running shoes, but she didn't go outside.** Instead, she walked downstairs to the basement and stepped on a treadmill. Father Bob Lombardo prayed and blessed her, and Sister Kate O'Leary played the U.S. national anthem on the cello. A whistle blew, the treadmill began to hum, and Sister Stephanie started running.

She ran a mile, then two miles, then ten. Three and a half hours later, Sister Stephanie had run 26.2 miles—a full marathon—on a treadmill. During that time, she appeared on the news and was cheered on by thousands of people around the world watching online. She also set a world record as the first woman to complete a marathon on a treadmill. But best of all, she raised money for the Mission of Our Lady of the Angels,



Although her classes are now online, Sr. Stephanie teaches religion for grades K-8.

in one of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods.

**Running a marathon takes serious training.** But the idea for running a treadmill marathon didn't start out too seriously. "It was just one of those random things that I said," Sister Stephanie explains. She is a sister of the Franciscans of the Eucharist of Chicago. She trains teams of runners every year to run and raise money for the Mission.

In April of 2020, events were starting to get canceled due to the COVID-19 virus. To motivate her team to keep training, Sister Stephanie joked that if the Chicago Marathon were canceled, she would run it on a treadmill. "Wouldn't that be hilarious?" she said at the time.

But when the marathon really did get canceled, Sister Stephanie kept her word. "I was going to just pick a random day, just me and God, and run the marathon on the treadmill by myself." But she says God had other plans. A friend suggested she share her long run on Zoom. "I was kind of shocked," she says. "People would actually watch this? Wouldn't they be completely bored?"



Community and friends prepare for Sister Stephanie's marathon on August 23, 2020.

Her friend PJ Weiland set up cameras so that people could watch and interact during the marathon. Sister Stephanie set a goal of raising \$40,000 for the Mission. By race day in August 2020, more than twice that amount had come in. By October, donations totaled over \$140,000. "When things don't seem to work out, God always has a better idea," she says.

**That's been true throughout Sister Stephanie's life.** She began running competitively at age nine in her hometown of Rockford, Illinois. In college at the University of Illinois, she was the sixth-fastest freshman in the nation, with dreams of Olympic glory. "God was certainly smiling at my plans," she says.

But everything changed in 2008 when she broke her foot while training. The injury ended her college competitive career, and she felt lost and depressed. Then some friends invited her to go on a retreat.

The Mission of Our Lady of the Angels exists to “assist the materially poor and to share the treasure of the Catholic Faith.” The Mission is part of the neighborhood and hosts food pantries, community dinners, senior programs, after-school activities, block parties, Bible camps, and other special events.



During an hour spent in the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, something changed for her. “I realized that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist,” she wrote in a blog post about her vocation. “The Eucharist is Jesus! And I was supposed to follow him as a religious sister. From my depressed, injured state, I realized Jesus wanted ME, not my achievements.”

Sister Stephanie spent time thinking and praying about the religious life. The teachings of Saint Francis captivated her, and she visited the Franciscan community where she now lives and works. “I was drawn to the life of poverty, prayer, and service. I felt very at home after my visits, and entered [the order] in August 2010. Our life has given me much joy and deep peace. I could not imagine myself anywhere else.”

**The Mission is located in the West Humboldt Park area of Chicago, one of the most challenged areas in the United States.** More than one in three people there lives in poverty, and

unemployment is high. Before the pandemic, the Mission fed about 1,000 families a month. Now they serve two to three times that number.

Sister Stephanie begins each day by joining the Franciscan community in prayer and the Mass. She divides up the rest of her day between working in the Mission food pantry, overseeing the renovation and construction of a new outreach center, and teaching religion to kids in kindergarten through eighth grade.

**She runs only a few times a week, but up until a few years ago, Sister Stephanie was still thinking about the Olympic trials.**



Sister Stephanie (center, kneeling) trains Team OLA runners who participate in races to raise money for the Mission.

“I was thinking I would do it for God’s glory,” she says. But to get ready for the Olympics, athletes have to train full-time. She says God showed her that this wouldn’t work with everything she wanted to do at the Mission. “God was showing me that training would take an unrealistic amount of time. He was saying, ‘You don’t have to do that; here’s a better thing for you to do.’ The consoling thing is that [through the marathon] we raised a ton of money—more than we would have if I had done the Olympic trials.”

Sister Stephanie explains that she is at peace with everything. “When you allow God to use the talents you have—even if it’s only kind of, or sometimes—God always shows you a better way.”

**To learn more, visit [missionola.com](http://missionola.com). Don’t forget to pray for the Mission. “We need prayers, for sure,” Sister Stephanie says.**



- 1** Why did Sister Stephanie stop running competitively?
- 2** How did Sister Stephanie’s friends help her? How can you encourage a friend?
- 3** Think about a time in your life when something was taken away from you. How can these times lead you to better things? Who can help you during these times?