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MARATHON MASTER SEES SHOP AS FIRST STEP TO A HEALTHIER W.VA.

DR. MARK CUCUZZELLA

Two Rivers Treads • Ranson

By CHRISTINE SNYDER • For The State Journal

Dr. Mark Cucuzzella completed his 25th Boston Marathon in April. For the first time, he did it wearing his favorite minimalist running sandal.

In the past decade he's chosen the footwear for other races, including the Marine Corps Marathon and the JFK 50-miler.

"The sandals performed beautifully — it was a very warm day and for some reason when your feet are exposed, you keep cool," Cucuzzella said. "Most people think you're crazy to wear sandals, but then when you still have spring in your legs in the final miles, I think they reconsider."

Cucuzzella, 50, fits in 50 to 60 miles of running in a typical week. He believes it only makes sense that runners need shoes that don't hurt their feet.

In 2006, the family physician switched to level running shoes — with no hiked-up heel like the running shoes most of us grew up with — and four years later opened the nation's first minimalist shoe specialty store in Jefferson County.

He says he's heartened to see more people put a focus on the foot.

"There's a growing acceptance that the foot is very important and that the foot should function naturally — and I'm not sure why that is such a novel idea," said Cucuzzella, who grew up outside Baltimore in Ellicott City, Maryland.

Cucuzzella was the second of four brothers, and earned his medical degree at the University of Virginia.

"It's kind of like telling diabetics that they shouldn't eat sugar or saying that what diabetics eat is important if they want to be healthy," he said. "It's foundational."

Of course the foot matters, and the shoe has to be right, says Cucuzzella, who, in addition to caring for patients and overseeing the Two Rivers Treads store also frequently leads workshops on the mechanics of running, including how runners can sidestep injuries.

Cucuzzella envisions his new retail space that recently moved from its original location in downtown Shepherdstown to a bigger space across the county in Ranson as a headquarters for runners, walkers and anyone else interested in healthy living — not only in the Eastern Panhandle but also throughout West Virginia.

The shop near the historic Ranson City Hall is a partnership with the nonprofit grassroots fitness group Bros & Bras, formerly based a few minutes from Ranson in downtown Charles Town.

Last year, Two Rivers Treads — the nation's first minimalist shoe shop when it opened in June 2010 — made *Competitor* magazine's "50 Best Running Stores in America" list. Cucuzzella believes the new store is positioned to outperform the old German Street location.

Ranson recently completed a major streetscape project, said Cucuzzella, who can make the two-block trek from his full-time work at Jefferson Medical Center to his shop in no time. The store is in an area with access to a number of safe, well-lit running and walking routes plus plenty of free parking.

In addition to selling minimalist shoes for men, women and kids, Cucuzzella's shop offers all the gear a runner



might need. It's also where Cucuzzella and other running experts deliver advice via the TrueForm Training Center, where an innovative treadmill helps users develop a natural running form.

The Mildred Street site is a hub for fitness meetups, where groups of all ages and abilities can head out on walks, runs and various training sessions.

"Our mission is to be a place of gathering, learning and discovering the love of running and health, plus we want to bring new people into the mix," Cucuzzella said.

The storefront also will serve as the headquarters for Freedom's Run, the nationally known event with a marathon, half-marathon, 10K, 5K and kids fun run schedule for Sept. 30. The race, which Cucuzzella co-founded in 2009, draws more than 2,000 participants every fall. In its second year, it surpassed the Charleston Distance Run, begun in 1973, as the biggest race series in the Mountain State.

Freedom's Run also does good long after the runners have gone home: Proceeds from the event fund fitness trails at schools, outdoor workout areas at parks and other efforts to make the Panhandle a healthier place to live.

Cucuzzella wants to see a culture of fitness and robust health take hold everywhere in West Virginia.

Getting more exercise is part of the remedy, but he'd also urge West Virginians to stop consuming so much white bread, sugar, soda and junk food.

"It's actually pretty simple," he said. "Just eat real food, and if you are obese or diabetic get rid of the sugar, not the healthy fats."

Cucuzzella is encouraged by new initiatives such as Try This West Virginia, the nonprofit with a mission statement



for a community-by-community strategy to “help knock West Virginia off the top of the worst health lists.”

The organization’s annual conference in Buckhannon included dozens of how-to workshops and more than 100 presenters. Cucuzzella helped organize the first Health Professionals Day that kicks off the event.

“We’re making very slow progress,” he said.

Cucuzzella is blunt about the need for huge change. When children’s diets are heavy on sugar-sweetened beverages and processed junk, they’re facing a future where diabetes and disease loom, he said.

“When the toxin that drives disease is accessible, acceptable and affordable, there is no way you can make grand change,” he said.

And though good health is at the heart of Cucuzzella’s life, he’s also a businessman. He says he’s grateful for Two Rivers Treads’ loyal customers and eager to welcome more people at the expanded site in Ranson.

“Small businesses keep dollars and jobs in the community,” he said. “It is far easier to go on the internet these days for everything, but we must all keep supporting small businesses to keep our towns special for future generations. We appreciate all the community members that support small business.”

