



PRESS PHOTO BY DIANA MORSE

Under the Lehigh Valley Health Network Marathon for Via banner are relay runners and sisters Ellen Kaspern, Jane Kaspern Burger, Elizabeth Kaspern, Melissa Kaspern and Ruthann Kaspern.

# Family ties, start to finish

## Bethlehem sisters complete LVHN Marathon for Via Relay

by DIANA MORSE  
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"Close" hardly describes Bethlehem born and raised sisters Ruthann, Jane, Elizabeth, Ellen and Melissa Kaspern.

"We use any excuse to get together," says Ruthann, the third of Mary Ann and the late Robert Kaspern's five daughters, and fourth in the family's lineup of six children, including eldest son, John. "A day rarely goes by when we don't talk."

Or run, for that matter.

Sept. 13, the sisters, as relay team "The Kasperns," joined more than 2,600 runners and walkers for the Lehigh Valley Health Network Marathon for Via to help raise money for Via of the Lehigh Valley's programs for children and adults with disabilities.

The 26.2-mile race through Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton is the third event the five siblings, aged 35 to 50, have teamed up to run. Last fall, they hit the pavement together for the first time, completing the Bethlehem 5K

Turkey Trot. This past June, they followed up with the Bethlehem Freedom to Liberty 4-miler.

Though they race together, much of the time the siblings train separately. When possible, two or three will join forces to run a local race.

Ellen, the next to youngest at 38, lives in Boston, Mass., and has been running for four years, completing a sprint triathlon in Duxbury with youngest sister, Melissa, in 2005. Melissa, who lives in Holliston, Mass., with her hus-

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band, Tom Herrity and the couple's four children, aged 23 months to 9 years, admits she had to jumpstart her training for the Via Marathon.

"I took about a 10-year break from running, but between having kids and a crazy life, I try to stay active," the part-time teacher says.

Ruthann, who lives in Bethlehem with husband Rick Angstadt and daughter Annmarie, trained in earnest for the Marathon with second-eldest sister Jane Kaspern Burger, the second eldest sister at 48, who lives in Bethlehem with husband Larry. This spring the two met for regular 5:30 a.m. running sessions.

"I ran two 5Ks this summer just to keep me on my toes," Jane says. Both times, she was accompanied by a sister.

The siblings say they enjoy the fitness aspect of running, but also get satisfaction from fundraising for the races. Together, they raised nearly \$400 for Via of the Lehigh Valley. All were pleased with The Kasperns' finishing time of 4:49:36, coming in 196th of the 201 relay teams. For The Kasperns, it isn't finishing first that counts — it's finishing

together.

Though they feel all their races are important, the sisters agree last fall's Turkey Trot will always hold a special place in their hearts, as it took place on sister Elizabeth's wedding day.

"The whole family was in town," Jane, a freelance court reporter, recalls. "We had special T-shirts made up for the event to celebrate. I hadn't really begun training seriously at that time and felt really accomplished running a 5K."

Elizabeth, the eldest sister at a confident 50, who lives in Bethlehem, is a senior vice president at Third Federal Bank in Newtown. She admits she took it easy during the Turkey Trot.

"I wanted to avoid being injured on my wedding day," she says. Though busy with her job and commute, Elizabeth says she still manages to find time to work out at her alma mater, Freedom HS.

"I know some of my sisters did not think I would make it through this relay," she laughs. "They often forget how driven I am." Just to make sure, she did a test run of her portion of the race a week before the relay.

"It's the last section, and the shortest, but I made it and I'm proud," she says.

Following the race, Elizabeth hinted it won't be her last relay.

"I think I'm hooked," she said. "The camaraderie among the other teams was great. The best part was running up to the finish line with the cheering crowd."

Among the cheering crowd were her four sisters — who joined her for the final sprint.

The girls credit their parents for instilling a love of physical activity as well as for one another.

"Our father always promoted a 'family first' attitude, and this continues today," says Ruthann, who says the girls started working out together nearly 20 years ago, beginning with Jane Fonda exercise tapes played in Elizabeth's basement. In addition, the family often took hiking trips together. All five sisters have made it to the top of Mt. Washington. All retain the fresh-faced look from years bathed in mountain air and sunshine.

"Our Dad instilled a 'can do' attitude toward fitness, and our Mom has been an avid and dedicated exerciser from the time we were young," Ruthann says. Last fall, Mary Ann, who continues to live in the family's North Bethlehem home, joined her daughters as a walker for last year's Turkey Trot.

When it came time to

run the Freedom to Liberty 4-miler, the sisters were thrilled the family home was on the course.

"We ran right past the house we all grew up in," Melissa, the youngest, recalls. "All our family was there to cheer us on."

At that time, the decision was made to enter the Lehigh Valley Health Network's challenging annual Marathon for Via as a relay team.

"Since the relay had five legs, it made sense for each of us to run one," Melissa says. "Entering it was Ruthann's idea, and Jane was the one who got us going. We may not be the fastest team but have fun cheering each other on along the way."

Family members at the finish line at Easton's Centre Square, included mother Ann Marie Kaspern, Jane's and Elizabeth's husbands, and Ruthann's husband and daughter.

Whether tortoise or hare, the sisters say winning doesn't matter. It's being together that counts.

"It is just a laugh fest," Jane says. "I don't know which of us is the biggest ham. Really, when it all comes down to it, your family is who will always be around you. I consider all my sisters my best friends. Just to hear their voice on the other end of the phone makes every day better."