Building the New 
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Recently I ran the longest race of my life. Now it wasn’t a marathon, or even a half marathon. Just a 5K, 3.1 miles. It was the Heroes of Health Fun Run, where kids wore capes and adults dressed like super heroes to raise money to benefit the Northern California Center for Wellbeing (NCCWB) children’s healthy living programs. Given that I had never run such a long race, I have to admit that part of me was intimidated. Would I be able to do it? I haven’t even run this much on a treadmill. Nevertheless, I committed myself to do it because I believed in the importance of the organization’s goal.

As a Sutter’s resident family medicine physician in getting ready to graduate in a month, I’ve seen plenty of children come through the clinic at Vista Family Health Center who statistics show will develop diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease years earlier in their life than their parents and grandparents because they didn’t have the opportunity to learn how to successfully live a healthy life. No one person is at fault here. This is a multifactorial problem. Nevertheless, the public health programs that the NCCWB have, including the Heroes for Health Fun Run, are just what is needed to helps those kids out.

So there I am, running next to my fiancée, a Pediatrician who knows much more than I about the obesity issue in children and can run a lot farther than I can too. I’m struggling not half way through the race. I had run more than half of a 5k before, but my mind was so focused on the fear and difficulty of finishing the whole thing that I began to believe I couldn’t do it. My legs are tired. I thought. A little while later I began to fixate on the pain in my hip. With every step I was that much closer to quitting. Then, something changed. I was passed in the race by a girl who was maybe 10 years old. At first I felt guilty that I couldn’t even run as fast as a young girl. But, then I said to myself That’s awesome. Look at her go. She is doing great. That was followed by the thought, Hey. I’m doing it too. This is great. We are all out here doing something healthy for such a meaningful purpose. My entire race turned around. I finished under 30 minutes, which was better than my goal. And, as the name suggested, that last half was indeed a Fun Run.

When I set out to write this piece, I began with the title “Fighting Chronic Disease.” This is a sentiment often heard within the healthcare field. “She is battling with cancer,” they say. “We can beat heart disease.” “He is struggling with quitting smoking.” All of these metaphors imply that there is a laboring effort against some kind of resistant force. Yet, why does chronic disease have to be an enemy that is always pushing us back? A term that encompasses the disease process that more Americans, kids and adults, live with than any other is Cardiovascular diabesity. It includes coronary artery disease, hypertension, diabetes, obesity and high cholesterol. All of these problems stem from our lifestyle choices, such the food we eat, the cigarettes we smoke, our activity or lack thereof, our sleep habits, and our stress levels.

Socrates said, “The secret of change is is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new.” At first in the Fun Run, I spent much of my time worrying about the old, the struggle over never having run such a long distance before. Once I focused on the fact that just attending the run was a success, simply being part of an event with the aim of helping more children be healthy, I was able to finish faster than I had hoped when I set out at the beginning. I think that same secret applies to the people of Northern California who want to live healthier lives themselves and the health professionals who are working with them to achieve this objective. If you work in the health care field, try not to take the easy way out by avoiding the conversation with your patient or client about living well. Don’t wrestle against the disease.
Instead, walk with them on their path and cheer them on with every healthy choice they make. If you're the one making the change, don't focus on how hard it is going to be, how much extra work it takes to change your old behaviors. Rather think about the extraordinary improvements that can happen once you begin making different choices. It's not about beating Cardiovascular Diabesity. It's about building a new life full of joy, vitality, and wellbeing.