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The Wissahickon Trail Classic stirs memories of the past while bringing aid to the park's future

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Photo by Steve Belkowitz

Lost in Philadelphia's Wilderness

by Justin Klugh

It's 2006, and Phil Ranly is lost in the Wissahickon. Somewhere along the trail, he took a wrong turn, became distracted by the sight of sunbeams yawning through the canopy or got caught in a wave of self-reflection. "There are some trails that run parallel to each other; they wind back into some pockets of other areas," he says of his occasional missteps. He wasn't the first victim of the park's winding trails. And he wouldn't be the last. "That's what was fun for me. You're in Philadelphia, but you're lost in the wilderness."

Thankfully, Ranly was able to find his way back and become instrumental, along with organizers Nancy Khan and Alyson Harris, in organizing the Wissahickon Trail Classic, an annual 10K race held since 2005 that benefits the park. It's given its 400 to 500 runners a formal event through which they can explore the arboreal oasis that's hidden in plain sight.

This year, the event takes place June 3. But early on in its existence, it became evident that despite the Wissahickon's popularity and exposure, it still, on occasion, has the space, the twists and the appetite to devour disoriented—and experienced—athletes.

"We've gotten runners lost, even with all the markings we put up to make it as error-proof as possible," Ranly says. "It goes to show you that there's enough diversity back there to really get lost. There's big trees, you're down in the valley, you can't see the cars, you can't see buildings, you can't hear the road."

The squealing brakes and honking horns of Center City Philadelphia and the surrounding neighborhoods are clogged with runners on any given day, predominantly amid the onset of spring. Running shoes are dug out of closets as winter hibernators return to the streets to maneuver around pedestrians, dash through red lights and vault over dog leashes. Trail running gives participants a chance to experience the kind of reflection and concentration that a runner may not get while dodging an ice cream truck driver looking at his phone.

"You're being absorbed in the moment of running," Ranly says, "whereas on roads you can see a mile ahead of you, your feet are just pounding on the concrete, you're looking at traffic signs and trying to meander those types of obstacles. But there's definitely a therapeutic art to trail running, of being out in the fresh air, being aware of the moment. For me, being in the moment of running and observing the trail is the experience of it. It's as much mental as it is physical."

A winding path that's always home

With a lengthy visitors log, Wissahickon Valley Park is a deep woodland with plenty of permanent residents as well, including herons, foxes, salamanders and water snakes. Its 1,800 acres are constantly sprouting with growth and a furious, sometimes surprising, ecosystem—in 2016, a wayward black bear captivated the Philadelphia news cycle for an afternoon as it forded the creek.

While serving as an important component of our ecosystem and as an escape from the frenzy of city life, the Wissahickon has been home to all manner of inhabitants and personalities since the 1600s: the Lenape Native Americans who gave the valley its name, religious zealots awaiting an apocalypse that would never come and Revolutionary War spies using its rough terrain for cover from British muskets. The Wissahickon Creek pushes through 23 miles of the park before draining into the Schuylkill River and at one point served as Philadelphia's chief water source.

"It's great that the city planners at the time were trying to protect the watershed," Ranly says. "That's why the whole Kelly Drive area was protected along the Wissahickon Creek, because that was the water source for the city of Philadelphia."

The Wissahickon's modern purpose has become to provide Philadelphians and surrounding suburbanites a retreat for walking, hiking, running, biking and horseback riding, creating a hub for interaction in what used to be a sprawling and more silent wood. The Wissahickon Wanderers are Philadelphia's premier trail running group, offering weekly runs on Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings as well as yearly events that don't have fees or

dues. As a former member, Ranly's exposure to the Wissahickon became a collective experience he shared with friends and neighbors.

But the trails of the Wissahickon don't stretch all the way to Indiana, where Ranly, now 37, has lived since 2013.

"My speed is now a fraction of what I used to be able to run," he says with a laugh. "A lot of my running now is with a jogging stroller. The therapeutic events of going out on a trail are kind of lost on me because I've got two babies to keep in mind." Ranly pauses for a wistful chuckle. "Now that you have me talking about it, I miss the park immensely."

It's 2017. And Phil Ranly would love to be lost in the Wissahickon again.

Keepers of the trail

Ron Ayres can be a tough man to reach. "Sorry," he says, "I put my phone down and went outside."

The Roxborough native grew up a wandering, darting adolescent. The woods of the Wissahickon were his battleground for imagined enemy soldiers and his hiding place for in-game pursuers. As he leapt over logs and crouched behind rocks of the arborous acreage, he instinctively drew a map in his head, creating a finely tuned, picturesque route through the wood, comprising favorite spots and inspired by treasured memories. Now, at 70 years old, when a breeze carries the scent of ginger and foamflower through his window and draws him back into the well-traveled thickets of his youth, he knows exactly which route he'll take.

"The yellow trail on the Roxborough end, it wanders along right up above the Wissahickon," Ayres explains. "But then I like to cross [over]... and take the orange trail—that's the one with the fewest bikes. There's a hundred steps there, there's the Fingerspan Bridge. It goes by Devil's Pool and up to Valley Green. That's always been a favorite of me and my children when we go for walks. You're up there by yourself, there's a steepness to it. The seclusion is really good over there."

As a board member and treasurer of the Wissahickon Restoration Volunteers since 2000, Ayres, a retired systems analyst who gained a background in horticulture in the '80s, will still spend two full days a week at work in the park. His biggest foes are no longer imaginary, and they now take the form of invasive plant species and overpopulated deer; he leads crews to clear debris and plant shrubs and trees. The Wissahickon Trail Classic is a boon for Ayres and the WRV, as the funds raised by the Wanderers for the race go straight to the sustainment of the park, which in turn is a natural choice for a trail-running expedition.

"The park is big and has so many kinds of environments," Ayres says. A Wissahickon lifer, even he claims there's a stretch along Lincoln Drive he still hasn't seen. "It has hard climbs, it has some flat areas, but it's a very challenging race because there's a lot of ups and downs. There are tributaries coming into the creek, so whenever there's a tributary when you're going along the steep side, you have to go down and back up. [Runners] just think this is the best trail run in this part of the country."

Advised on race matters by the Wanderers, Ayres and the WRV are enthusiastic helpers of the cause, as the two organizations work symbiotically to maintain the woods in an imitation of the ecosystem surrounding them—Ayres' WRV colleague, Steve Jones, will lead a 5K nature hike while the Wanderers are running the Wissahickon Trail Classic.

"It's just worked out really well," Ayres says—though he's not a distance runner himself, something he explains with a gruff laugh. "I'm a basketball player."

There's an irony in the Wissahickon's ability to bring people together through its offers of isolation. But seclusion is a powerful influence, motivating runners, hikers or dwellers of the woods to reveal their true selves, at whatever speed they choose.

"When I get a chance," Ayres admits quietly, "and nobody's with me, and I see a trail... I'll run for as long as I can."

Call of the wild

It drains, it tires, it saps runners of energy, all the while displaying miles of green life around them. But the park's challenges have not scared off Wissahickon Trail Classic runners for over a decade. Even to those like Ranly, who've left it behind, it calls—a reminder of its existence is all a former runner needs to beckon them once more into its depths, to marvel at the luster of nature and summon the strength for one more bend in the trail; one more steep climb; one more stumble and handful of wet earth.

After speaking for this story, Phil Ranly sent an email. The woods had overtaken his thoughts, he said, and the Wissahickon's growth had wrapped his every thought in its azaleas and been echoing with the rapid strikes of pileated woodpeckers.

“Seriously,” he wrote, “you have me thinking of making the drive to attend this year!”

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