

Ragnar Relay starts in rain: Team going 180 miles to Boston for charity

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NEW HAVEN — As runners in the Ragnar Relay lined up at Lighthouse Point Park Friday to kick off a 180-mile jaunt from New Haven to Boston, the wind picked up and heavy rain poured down.

But it didn't stop the charity racers from getting pumped for the overnight adventure.

"Which way to Boston?" shouted Mark Milano, a runner and organizer for the Rum Runners team of West Haven.

Milano's 12-man team, which includes three of his sons, was one of 50 teams signed up to run the relay, named for a ninth-century Viking king. For the New England Ragnar Relay — they are held all over the country — participants take turns running legs of the race, passing a baton to the next runner, relay-style.

Each 12-person team must have two vans to pick up and drop off runners as they leapfrog from New Haven to Boston following mostly back roads. The more outlandishly decorated the team's van is, the better. Costumes are encouraged.

A portion of proceeds from the Ragnar Relay benefits Operation Kids, which funds children's charities. But teams also choose their own cause and use the race as a way to raise money for it.

For the Rum Runners, the obvious choice was the West Haven Community House, which helps children, teens, families and adults with developmental disabilities.

"A lot of these guys wouldn't be doing this unless we were doing it for a good cause. We thought, 'Do something fun and create a little awareness for the Community House,'" Milano said. His wife, Cheryl Milano, is a board member for the agency.

Patricia Stevens, Community House executive director, said she couldn't be happier that her organization was picked.

"We are sincerely grateful and appreciative that they have turned what has been a fun and exciting challenge into a philanthropic adventure," she said. "We really commend them for this generous gesture."

Before the relay was a philanthropic adventure, it was a dare of sorts between three friends: Milano, Robert Saley and Brian Elliott.

“They asked me one night and I said, ‘No,’” Saley recalled. “Then Milano said, ‘Elliott is running,’ and I said, ‘Well, if Elliott’s doing it, I guess I have to.’”

And so it began. Soon the friends had formed a team and recruited more friends and family members to compete.

Milano’s son, Peter, 22, doesn’t consider himself a runner, though he’s finished the Boston Marathon and was about to compete in a race that will have him running three times in 25 hours.

“I run pretty much only for crazy things like this,” he said.

But Peter Milano said races like the Ragnar Relay, which his father talked the brothers into, are a good time and good for the community. He’s making sure his team is in the spirit of things by making skull-and-crossbones T-shirts for the pirate theme.

Everyone on the team has been training for the big race, which started Friday and ends this afternoon in Boston. Along the way, runners will get breaks in vans and a chance to munch energy bars and get some sleep.

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