



IGNITING THE FLAMES OF POSSIBILITY IN FUTURE RAMBLIN' ROSE TRIATHLETES

BY JOE NUSS

The five-foot frame and humble demeanor of pediatric dentist and 2010 Ramblin' Rose Winston-Salem sponsor Tina Merhoff is a dynamo of faith and enthusiasm that radiates through the walls of her practice in Winston-Salem and into the lives of the people she has touched. Boundless energy flows through her words and actions providing an emotional and spiritual charge that powers the batteries of inspiration. Not surprisingly, after Tina registered for last year's Ramblin' Rose in Winston-Salem, nine other women were drawn to join her sharing a common goal to use the physical health they were blessed with to help the homeless.

"We realized that we wanted to do this for something greater," says Tina. "So, we decided to help homeless shelters and try to help the hungry. The homeless shelters needed a lot of support last year because there were a lot of people without jobs."

To help, Tina made an agreement with the other women: they would run as a team and for every person that finished she would make a donation of \$100 for the Winston-Salem race and any other Ramblin' Rose race should any of the women decide to participate in more events. Tina would send the money raised to homeless shelters.

Tina's team fielded at least three participants in every Ramblin' Rose last year, including Tina herself. This year, they hope to participate in all five Ramblin' Rose events in a continuing effort to help the homeless.

"We just love giving back to this community that gives so much to us," expressed Tina in speaking of not just her Ramblin' Rose team, but her pediatric "Dream Team" which, like Tina, became a part of the Winston-Salem community from its own humble beginnings.

"I grew up very poor and didn't know if I would make it to college," says Tina. "I can still remember

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overhearing my parents talking in their bedroom about how they would get me through college. I could hear them say, 'Tina's heart is set on going to college. How are we going to make that happen - we're just not a college family.' It broke my heart to hear my parents worrying. They had never gone to college and they didn't know much about financial aid or scholarships."

With help from her guidance counselors and her faith in Jesus, Tina was able to earn enough scholarships to enable her to become the first college graduate on either side of her family.

"I have extremely strong faith," says Tina. "I love Jesus Christ and I go to him constantly and I prayed to him constantly throughout college. When I got accepted to college and eventually dental school I knew my goal was to somehow find a way to give back all that had been given to me."

Later, Tina began working with a small group of four ladies who shared her vision for pediatric dentistry. In the humble atmosphere of a Hampton Inn conference room they wrote their mission statement. Now, with 18 employees and a common vision, they work to give back to the Winston-Salem community.

"We started out very small," says Tina, "but always had this mission of inspiring children. We have this opportunity with every child that walks through our doors to influence their life and make them feel great about themselves and believe that they can do anything they want to - I'm a living symbol of that."

This year, Tina has encouraged all of her employees to participate in Ramblin' Rose Winston-Salem and has given them memberships at the Gateway YWCA to help enable their training to complete a Ramblin' Rose event.

"Triathlon seems like a scary word but, Ramblin' Rose offers an opportunity that's achievable if you work at it," adds Tina whose most inspirational moment occurred before her first Ramblin' Rose even started.

"When my original team decided to do Winston-Salem, we wanted our race to be a spiritual and bonding experience," says Tina. "So, before the race we read passages from a book together. The book, *Losers and Winners, Saints and Sinners: How to Finish Strong in the Spiritual Race* by Greg Laurie, compares the race of life to running a race. We were reading this book in a circle at our transition area and so many women were coming over and joining - they wanted to hear what we were reading and just wanted to pray with us. It was so magical! There we were in our bathing suits, everyone holding hands and praying. That moment is something I'll never forget. It was wonderful, it truly was. When you're together like that - the encouragement that everyone offers one another at a Ramblin' Rose - there's no way you couldn't try to finish," says Tina. "I love it!"