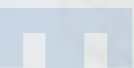


Running on

Sugar Land Athlete Serves as Volunteer Guide for Visually Impaired Runners

Written with Select Photography By Jen Petty



There are around 6.5 billion people on earth. Each year about 40,000 of them do an Ironman Triathlon. The race includes a 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike ride, and marathon run (26.2 miles) and is beyond grueling. It requires perseverance and dedication. Sugar Land resident, business owner, and professional athlete Matt Miller has competed in five Ironmans in the past five years including the prestigious Ironman World Championship in Hawaii. He knows the demands of the Ironman well. The difference between Miller and most of the race participants is that, in four of those races, he served as a guide for a blind athlete – enabling them to compete in one of the toughest races in the world.

Seeing Things Differently

Almost 10 years ago when Miller began his career as a professional athlete, he realized that the majority of the preparation for the competitions is self-centered. “In everything from the food you eat to your training routines, you are always focusing on yourself,” he says. He wanted to find an avenue where he could give back and contacted a friend who worked at a foundation for challenged athletes, who in turn connected Miller with Heidi, a blind athlete in Chicago. Little by little, Miller’s group grew by word of mouth from the one original visually impaired athlete in 2002, to two the next year, to 36 in 2005, to more than 300 across the country today.

In 2005, when more people started to become interested, Miller formed the C-Different Foundation to help connect visually impaired athletes with guides. The name of the organization came about after Miller was talking with a blind athlete who said, “We still see the world, just a little bit differently.” Although the C-Different Foundation is relatively new in the Sugar Land and Houston area, there are different chapters around the nation, with the largest of those in Chicago and Florida. Miller’s first C-Different race in Sugar Land was a 5K held in December, with 37 blind athletes, most of whom were from Sugar Land, among the race competitors. “Sugar Land is fantastic for what we are doing,” Miller says. “It is a multi-sport community and the volunteers and support here has been amazing.” He is currently planning another C-Different race in Sugar Land for later this year.

Helping Guide Others

Leigh Ann and Andrew Coultier, and their son, Grayson, of Greatwood, are just starting to get involved with C-Different. Grayson, now 7, was born at just 24 weeks. He did amazingly



Blind Faith



Athlete Grayson Coultier of Greatwood
with C-Different founder Matt Miller

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After training for several Ironman races, Miller began C-Different to give back to others



The foundation is always looking for guides to walk and run with athletes

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Supporting the Blind

Miller moved to Sugar Land about two years ago to open up his own business, Acumen Contracting Group, and spread the word about C-Different. Acumen donates 1% of every \$1 it earns to C-Different, and it's not just Miller who is involved. Many of Acumen's employees have also worked as guides for different events. Participation is not required, but is definitely encouraged as a good way to give back.

Future plans include obtaining grants for blind athletes, launching a website that allows guides and athletes to connect, educating the community, and supporting research for fighting blindness and finding cures. To volunteer or make a donation, visit cdifferent.org.

well, says mom Leigh Ann, considering he only had a 20% chance of survival. The only condition he had when he went home from the NICU was Retinopathy of Prematurity, which left Grayson completely blind in one eye and with a vision of 20/1800 in the other eye. Through visual therapy with local doctors and corrective contacts and glasses, Grayson now has a vision of 20/80 in his one functioning eye.

“Working with the blind is a true test of character – of who you are – because they can see right through the stuff and ‘see’ you.”

–Matt Miller

Leigh Ann says it has been difficult to find activities for her son to participate in. Most sports are very difficult, because a person with vision in only one eye doesn't have depth perception, she explains. “They are so scared,” she says. “They have no idea if a ball coming at them is 20 feet away or right in front of their face.” When Leigh Ann heard that a C-Different athlete named Charlie was coming to Houston, she called to see if he would meet with Grayson. Charlie was staying with Miller and told the Coultiers that they could meet at Miller's house. Leigh Ann didn't know at the time that Miller's business, Acumen Contracting Group, was the one that had started working to repair the family's roof, but was pleasantly surprised when she found out about the connection. “I about fell over,” she says. “That's how God works.”

The meeting with Charlie was amazing, says Leigh Ann, and sparked Grayson's desire to run, along with his enthusiasm for other things, showing him he could do physical activities normally restricted to those who are visually impaired. “We're really excited to find the C-Different organization,” she says. Grayson is hoping to do his first race in May, but his interest has also been piqued in other things. “He just said this weekend that he wanted to do Karate,” Leigh Ann says. “It just blew my mind, but anything he wants to try we are all for.”

Visualizing the Future

Miller is quick to point out that the rewarding work his foundation does is not just for the accomplished athlete or aspiring Ironman competitor. He has helped athletes with varying degrees of blindness and some who are even completely blind. Similarly, there are no requirements for volunteers, he says. Miller recalls that several of the guides for the December 5K in Sugar Land walked the race with blind athletes. “We can use anyone's help, and we'll support anyone who is visually impaired and wants to lead an active lifestyle.”

Miller takes pride in his work with visually impaired athletes, which he says is very rewarding. “The world we are living in tends to focus on worldly, materialistic things. Working with the blind is a true test of character – of who you are – because they can ‘see’ right through the stuff and ‘see’ you,” he says, adding, “It humbles you.” To join the C-Different Foundation as an athlete, volunteer, or guide, visit cdifferent.org. **SLM**

JEN PETTY is the editor of Sugar Land Magazine and is planning on joining C-Different as a guide for the next 5K.

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