

There is Peace in the Don Valley

Trail running and cleanup efforts in Toronto's Don Valley system helps Lawrence Warriner get a grasp on tinnitus

By Tina Costanza

If you're looking for Lawrence Warriner, there's a good chance you'll find him on a trail in Toronto's Don Valley. He'll either be running on it, which helps manage his tinnitus, or cleaning it.

Trail running has always been Warriner's favourite type of running, and he's no slouch at it: he's a national class masters runner, came in first at the 2014 Brooklyn Marathon in New York, was the overall winner of the 5 Peaks Trail Running Series Ontario, the Peterborough Half Marathon and the D&H Rail Trails Half Marathon, and he's run the Boston Marathon 17 times.

Warriner is also the founder and head coach of the running group Toronto TRUE (Trail Running-Urban Experience) Running and co-founder of Don't Mess With the Don (dontmesswiththedon.ca).

A few others, including a runner and a cyclist, were also cleaning and offered to help him carry out bags of trash. Rage and blaming others suddenly seemed petty and useless.

He wrote about that experience in what became a popular blog post on torontotrue.com. A group member, Irene Vandertop, then suggested starting a movement, which Warriner named Don't Mess With the Don.

The group, established in March 2018, has generated results. Don't Mess With the Don joined forces with property management companies whose buildings border the "trashiest" areas of the valley, and they have installed fences to discourage dumping. Brands Salomon, Patagonia and Arc'teryx have provided staff and gear for cleanups, and Greenpeace backed a cleanup

7K," it's scheduled for Sept. 20, 2020.

In the past couple of years, nearly 2,000 volunteers have helped clean the valley, Warriner says. Garbage audits reveal that within that time, Don't Mess With the Don has removed 50,000–70,000 pounds of garbage. That includes safes, tires, toys, money, car parts, large pipes, advertising boards "and lots and lots of plastic," Warriner adds.

Warriner even found a hungry and worm-ridden cat while running on the trails a dozen years ago. "Tipper" has since become part of his family, which includes his wife, Nancy, and daughter, Katie. He credits them with keeping him running and not withdrawing from the world while he lives with an almost continuous loud, high-pitched ringing in both ears.

The tinnitus first began to take hold in the summer of 2018.

"[Running] was such a blessing and escape," says Warriner. "As time went on, that changed, and the ringing became just as penetrating while running."

By early fall, it was full-blown, and it affected Warriner's sleep. For him, the lack of shut-eye is the hardest part about tinnitus and running. "I don't feel rested and recovery is tougher because I sleep so very poorly," he says.

Doctors and the hearing clinic at Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto helped him understand the condition, but it had left him feeling hopeless. There is no cure.

Treating tinnitus involves "teaching your brain it's not an important sound. Let it be the train that runs beside your home that, as a resident, you never hear," Warriner says.

Despite his challenging condition, Warriner keeps running. In 2019, he completed two 50K races – the Arches Ultra in Moab, Utah, where he finished 5th overall and first in the masters category, and the North Face Endurance Challenge in San Francisco, where he finished 20th overall.

Warriner found the best way for him to deal with tinnitus is by meditating, which he does as he runs on the trails in the valley he helps to keep clean.

"Running on the trails offers a chance for peace. You immerse yourself in the woods, the colours and sounds, the community that exists there," Warriner says.

"Tinnitus can be so overwhelming sometimes, it can be very hard to move forward and stay motivated in many aspects of your life. Running every day reminds me that I can move forward...Engagement with life keeps the train in the background." **R**

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The idea for the latter group, which aims to keep the valley's trail system clean and to fix related issues at their source, originates on the day Warriner witnessed deer wading through garbage in the valley.

"That got me steamed," says Warriner, who had been doing cleanups both on his own and with friends and family. "I was outraged that we treated the valley and its ecosystem so poorly."

He went out the next day to finish cleaning.

for Earth Day 2018.

Several city councillors have also supported the group, which advocated for funding for litter removal and invasive species control in Toronto's ravines. As of late January 2020, the city's budget committee still needs to approve financing for the plan.

A trail race to further connect people to the green space and support Don't Mess With the Don is in the works. Tentatively called "Don Valley Dirty Little Secret Trail