

'Running mom' steps down as coach in Victoria Cool Aid program

[Katie DeRosa](#) / Times Colonist

May 19, 2015 06:00 AM

Gillie Easdon, centre, who has spent the last six years as program co-ordinator for Every Step Counts, a walking and running program for people with challenges related to housing, mental illness or addiction, takes her last walk with the group.

Photograph By DARREN STONE, Times Colonist

Gillie Easdon was walking the Times Colonist 10K last month with a client of the Every Step Counts program when the tears started to well, as she realized it was the last time she would help someone across the finish line.

In her role as co-ordinator of the running and walking group for people with challenges related to housing, mental illness or addiction — a role she stepped away from Friday — Easdon has acted as cheerleader, counsellor, parent, chef, fundraiser and promoter.

Since the Victoria Cool Aid Society-run program kicked off in 2009, she has coached nearly 700 people, many of whom had no running experience when they walked in the door and were handed a pair of gently used running shoes. Easdon has cheered people across the finish lines of the GoodLife Fitness Victoria Marathon, the TC 10K and several other races throughout Greater Victoria.

She paddled with them in the Victoria Dragon Boat Festival, broke bread with them over group meals and led pep talks before the twice-weekly runs.

On Friday, from the Downtown Activity Centre on Pandora Avenue, Easdon said goodbye to those who have come to lean on her as they jumped emotional and physical hurdles that once seemed insurmountable.

"It's been a blessing ... to be given the opportunity to help nurture and create a community," Easdon said. "This has been a huge, amazing experience for me."

Clients know they don't have to share their challenges or stories, but as the group becomes a close-knit community, many do.

Easdon remembered the time one woman told the group she was celebrating the fact that she had earned the right to see her daughter again. Instead of judgment, the news was welcomed with hugs and high fives.

"A recurring theme of what was missing in their lives was family," Easdon said. "I was the emergency contact for 10 per cent of my runners."

As she looks back on all those who have strapped on running shoes, Easdon remembers the most powerful thing anyone has ever said to her: "I feel like for the first time, I belong."

Wayne Sheeran, 67, has run with the group since almost Day 1, and described Easdon as "the running mom."

"She's been nurturing us, and me for all those years. If I'm not feeling so great or having a rough time or feeling a bit depressed, she's always got a kind word. She's always there."

Every Step Counts was established by the Victoria Foundation and is funded by Frontrunners, the Jawl Foundation and many other sponsors and donors.

The participants have taken on various side projects, such as making Granola That Counts, a product sold for a limited time at Thrifty Foods as a fundraiser for the program. The group also entered a team in the Victoria Dragon Boat Festival.

Easdon decided to leave the position after her hours were cut from 34 to 20 a week, following restructuring moves by Cool Aid Society.

Cool Aid has already hired a replacement, Khalilah Alwani, who has a background in nutritional health and previously helped run the positive wellness program for AIDS Vancouver Island.

Rob Reid, owner of Frontrunners, long-time race director for the Victoria Marathon and Every Step Counts volunteer, said the program has done so well under Easdon that outreach workers and fitness proponents in cities across Canada have expressed interest in copying it.

“She’s really made for that position. She’s poured her heart and soul into it,” Reid said.

“Gillie has been such a strong mentor and ... a strong proponent of when you walk in the door, we’re all equal. People look to her as a guiding light for some hope in your life.”

[kderosa@timescolonist.com \(mailto:kderosa@timescolonist.com\)](mailto:kderosa@timescolonist.com)

© Copyright Times Colonist