

Footprints 2023: Running with Purpose to Transform the World



The ink-blue sky yields gracefully to a crisp dawn, and the sun bestows a golden blessing heralding the commencement of Footprints 2023. The morning unfolds with the bustle of participants energetically greeting each other and limbering up with pre-run exercises, readying for the kick off of a thrilling sporting event in Bangalore, a 5K and 10K run – with a difference. Organized by children, for children, any hint of disadvantage in their backgrounds fades into insignificance as the young and the old mingle, sharing camaraderie and friendship – and purpose.

Footprints, an annual run conducted by the RISHI Foundation since 2022, echoes the spirit of Rishi, an athlete who gifted the world 17 enchanting years, illustrating the transformative power of selfless acts. Through this event, participants aspire to leave permanent footprints for generations to come.

At 6:30 am, the 10K race is flagged off by 8-year-old Pratisha. Being born with HIV and losing her parents at a young age does not deter her; instead she dreams of changing her world. Each stride of her well-practiced limbs aims at not merely conquering the course but at forging a positive impact on the lives of other children like her. A few minutes later, the 5K run is kick-started by the youthful energy of 7-year-old Nandari, a little one growing up among the love and mentorship offered by his community, with HIV being just another routine condition to live with. He is a joyous spectacle as his little legs fly through the kilometres, flanked and followed by hundreds of enthusiastic runners from all walks of life. The sight of children cheerily covering the entire length of the course is a testament to their dedication, nurtured daily under the auspices of the Positive Running Program.

At the heart of this endeavour lives the Positive Running Program that empowers children and youth by using running as a catalyst to harness their physical and mental abilities. In doing so, the program instills in children the confidence to pursue an active, healthy and holistic lifestyle. The essence of this program is to create not winners of a race, but winners in the journey of life.

Footprints 2023 saw 737 registered participants, among whom were 278 enthusiastic children. They came from across Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and other Indian states, as well as from countries as far away as the United States and Sweden. Age faded as a barrier as participants from 7 to 85 years, crossed the finish line together.

"I am a middle-aged mother who had never taken running seriously, but it was like my shoes had wings, and I was flying through the course!" says a beaming woman, pulled along by her enthusiastic son.

"We had this unprepared dance at one of the water stations. It felt like a cross between a festival and a family run!" says a young college student, who had trained for the 10K for months.

"Finishing the 10K was tough, but crossing that finish line made every step worth it," 15-year-old Aishwaraya affirms, her eyes reflecting a mix of pride and relief, as she shares how the support she received from captains from the Positive Running Program, as well as the volunteers' cheers along the course fuelled her determination to complete the run. *"Footprints taught me that I'm capable of more than I thought".*

Integral to Footprints is the 'Buddy' concept, where one could be a buddy runner and sponsor a child from a disadvantaged background to participate in the run. A mere Rs. 1000 covers the cost of a child's travel and participation in Footprints; but to each child, it conveys the priceless message that someone cares.

As the finishers cross the line, they are greeted with resounding cheers and are bestowed with special medals embedded with Tulsi seeds and handwritten messages from children. Planting these seeds, and awaiting the sprouts symbolizes the run's mission — sowing the beginnings of self-empowerment, and nurturing each child to become a changemaker.

After the run, a tasty and nourishing breakfast awaited, accompanied by uplifting melodies from Vantablack, a versatile band blending fusion music of unique flavors, filling the air with rhythm and energy. Participants swayed to the beats and hung out in the lush green lawns of Snehadaan campus, sharing experiences with fellow runners, learning about the RISHI Foundation's activities and all while fostering connections with the children who were their Buddy Runners at Footprints. There is purpose in the air, and transformation is surely around the corner.