

**FRESH START**

Organizer Lisa Shannon (arms up) shouted, "Go!" and participants in the first Run for Congo Women in Central Africa took off.

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# A Magnificent Mile

Women around the world have been running to aid victims of unspeakable violence in the Congo. Then these survivors experienced the power, freedom, and joy of moving forward themselves



**LOCAL COLOR**  
Participants sang, danced,  
and then ran in T-shirts  
Shannon gave them.

O

**n the shore of Lake Kivu in war-torn eastern Congo,** an old woman shouldering a heavy load of cassava leaves stopped to watch a group of women run in the morning drizzle. A road race was under way, and women flew past her, dressed more for church than a Sunday morning run. Some of the runners held up the hems of their colorful skirts, others carried their sandals. Costume jewelry bounced. Scarves flapped in the breeze. Bare feet slapped against the wet pavement. ■ Xaverine Nafranga ran in that pack. About five years ago, Nafranga had been abducted by militia—yet another victim of the conflict that’s ravaged the Democratic Republic of the Congo for 12 years. She managed

to escape, then slept in the forest with her children for two years to avoid recapture. Fellow runner Deodatte Masirika watched as rebels shot and killed her husband and took her son; he is still missing. Florencia M’Nabirhu was gang raped. To escape an attack on her village, Venciana M’mizinzi, a quiet mother of five, sprinted to the bush. The following morning, she found her grandfather and two cousins shot dead, her house burnt. At the race, Generose Namburho, hobbled on crutches down the road on one leg. After rebels had shot her husband, they sliced off her

leg, cooked it over a fire, and at gunpoint, told her kids to eat it. When her 12-year-old son refused—“I can’t eat a part of my mother,” he said—they killed him.

These women were just five of the 47 Congolese women who participated in a mile run in the city of Bukavu on February 28. They had not trained. Most had never run for any other purpose than to escape violence. No matter. For them, the Run for Congo Women wasn’t a sporting event but “a chance to come together,” as one woman put it. “And when we are together, we are strong.”

Members of a construction crew stopped and leaned on their shovels to watch them go by. Passengers in an old tan bus peered through the windows. A boy balancing bamboo on his head poked his friend and pointed. The women smiled at the attention. As they sprinted down the lakeside road, one woman pumped her arm in triumph as the rest broke out in song.

**T**hese women’s plight can be traced back to 1998, when the Congolese government split with its Rwandan backers and a rebellion broke out. Neighboring nations and militia groups—including one led by perpetrators of the 1994 Rwandan genocide—took sides. At the height of the war, mass killings were common. A series of peace treaties in 1999 and 2002 officially ended the war. But the violence hardly stopped. Rebels and government forces continued to kill, maim, and employ rape as a means of control and intimidation.

More than 8,000 miles away, Lisa Shannon took notice. In 2005, the 29-year-old owner of a Portland, Oregon, photography

business learned about the conflict in Congo while watching *Oprah*. Details of the devastation shook her: 4 million dead and counting (5.4 million today, according to the International Rescue Committee). Shannon signed up to sponsor two Congolese women through Women for Women International (WFWI), a Washington, D.C.–based nonprofit that helps women affected by war. But the effort felt small. So she ran 30 miles. It was an ambitious distance for someone who had once attempted to train for a marathon, but 10 miles into a long run, bagged the whole thing—the run, the training, the marathon—and took a cab home. She chose the distance to show friends and family her commitment—an extreme endeavor to represent a dire situation.

Shannon’s run raised \$28,000, enough to sponsor 80 women (and to earn her an RW Heroes of Running award). The recipients used the money for school fees and medical supplies and to learn a trade, such as farming, cooking, sewing, or ceramics. Shannon quickly became a passionate advocate for the cause, creating a Web site and speaking to runners and senators to



**MOTHERS’ DAY**  
Congolese women have six children, on average. Many have also taken in orphans.



bring attention to the Congolese victims' plight. The following year, when Shannon repeated her 30-mile run, she had company. People in 10 states and four countries hosted their own Run for Congo Women events, ranging from two- to 30-mile group runs, raising more than \$75,000.

In 2007, Shannon traveled to Congo to meet her "sisters," as she calls the women supported by these runs. She sat with a group of 50 women in the town of Baraka, where women told her that 500 people had been slaughtered in a nearby village. Fifty percent of the women in the group had been raped. A mother explained to Shannon that women had to farm the land in order to feed their children, but doing so put them at risk of being captured and raped. One woman asked, "Do they rape women in America?" Shannon said, yes, women are raped all over the world, and in fact, a few American RFCW runners had been raped—it was one reason they chose to participate. The women nodded. Then one raised her hand, "What can we do so that we can support other women?"

The question caught Shannon by surprise. These women were struggling to feed their families, and they wanted to know how they could help others? Since founding her Run for Congo Women series, Shannon had known that she wanted to hold an event in the country. But since Congolese women don't run for fitness, and the security situation made it impossible for her to stage one for foreigners, Shannon imagined she'd do a 30-mile solo trek in Congo. But the conversation with her sisters inspired a change

of plans. "I realized that their desire to help was part of their healing process, part of regaining their strength," she says. "And that's the heart of sponsorship, tapping into their power."

**S**o, yes, you will do the Salimbe?" Shannon asked a group of women who watched as she moved her arms in a running motion. Salimbe was both man and myth, a distance runner famous in Congo for having run from south Lake Kivu to Kisangani, about 310 miles to the northwest. Her translator had said the term would be useful in explaining the run. "Yes, yes," the women said, a few pumping their arms.

Because most of the women in Congo have no access to e-mail, a phone, or regular mail, Shannon and WFWI staff personally invited participants in the weeks leading up to the event. They traveled up mountain roads, to a tea plantation, and to villages tucked into the foothills of Kahuzi-Biega National Park, where militia still occupy an estimated 90 percent of the land. Other logistical tasks were divided. WFWI worked with officials in Bukavu, the city where the run was being held, invited the mayor, and secured an all-female police squad. Shannon selected and measured the course (1.1 miles from the dirt patch to the grassy patch) and arranged transportation for participants.

The day before the run, Shannon called to confirm a taxi for women traveling that evening to Bukavu. Some of the women lived 30 miles away, so Shannon had arranged for them to stay nearby overnight. After she hung up, a UN staffer who was serving as a translator spoke

up. He insisted that the women be picked up earlier so that they would arrive at their hotel well before 6 p.m. Militia loot vehicles in the evenings, he explained. The risk was too high. "Just when you think peace has arrived, you get a phone call, like the one I got two weeks ago," he said. "Someone called to report that eight women were abducted. Most were gang raped, five were killed, three, we believe, have escaped." (The three women would later be admitted to a hospital in the Bukavu suburb of Panzi.) The pickup time was changed.

Panzi is home to Namburho, 40, and some of the other women. While Shannon made phone calls, they discussed what they'd wear. A local beautician styled Namburho's hair and trimmed her eyebrows. Cibalonza Muhigirwa, 48, who lives on a hill high above Lake Kivu, set out her best skirt before going to bed. And at midnight, on a tea plantation, a group of women sat whispering in a small grass hut. The rest of the village had been sleeping for hours, but they were too excited to rest. And also worried. A van would pick them up at 6 a.m. What if it was early? What if they missed it? They took no chances and went and sat on the side of the road to wait.

**B**efore the start of the run, women danced and sang. "Come let's run and dance for others!" they chanted in Swahili as they circled around a woman squatting on the ground, pounding on a plastic oil can. "Let's dance and rejoice with our mothers!" Mud stuck to their plastic sandals. A baby bounced on its mother's back. A shrill rose up. "Aaiaiaiaaaaaaiiiiiih!"—the Congolese exclamation of celebra-

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#### RELAX, RECHARGE, RECONNECT

After the race, women picnicked in a lush field near the shores of Lake Kivu (far left). Though water was offered, most participants chose to drink soda, a luxury they can't afford (center). A war survivor showed Shannon one of the dolls that she crafts and sells in an effort to support herself (above).

tion. M'mizinzi, 27, said she came "to have strength." Nafranga, 43, said she was "over happy and wishes we could get together every day." Masirika, 45, described the scene in three words: "This is joy." A van pulled up and Namburho, the unofficial matron of the sisters, climbed out, dressed in a lipstick-red suit and pink pearls. She smiled as others greeted her. The song and dance continued for two hours, the women's own spirited warmup.

The run had been scheduled for 10 a.m., but it began to rain, so the start was moved to 9:15. The mayor, Shannon, and Namburho addressed the runners. "Don't worry about the rain," Namburho said, just as it began to come down harder. "Advocate for your country. Stand up and fight against rape."

The women, 47 in total, moved to the street. A few scraped inch-thick mud off their shoes. Two unfurled a Run for Congo Women banner. There was no clock, no marked starting line. There were, however, a few women who seemed to be jockeying for position. They moved to the outside, eyes on Shannon, waiting. With rushed fanfare, she shouted, "On your mark. Get set. Go!" and the mass surged forward, collectively at first, but then one by one, women pulled out and flew down the road. A minute later, a pack of 15 led. Their breathing heavy, their smiles wide. The rain stopped and a woman surged. The others responded. In the back, Namburho moved along on her mismatched crutches. Shannon ran barefoot beside her. Someone resumed singing, and a policewoman blew her whistle in unison with each footfall.

A few minutes into the run, a truck rumbled by, and Congolese and Chinese workmen shouted in French "Courage! Courage!" The Chinese were helping pave the road, which connected Bukavu and Goma, 112 miles to the north. The road was named N2, but a UN worker referred to it as "Refugee Road" for the flood of displaced people who had traveled it after war broke.



#### FEMALE FORCE

Bukavu city officials, including a 15-member all-women police squad, attended the event to show support.



It was a good route: paved (not muddy), flat (rare in this mountainous country), away from the busy town center, and beautiful. To the left, hilltops covered with dense bush, terraced farmland, and the occasional banana grove. To the right, the glassy waters of Lake Kivu with Rwanda's blue mountains in the distance. The road cut east, then traveled north, and as the women took the turn, the lead pack dwindled to six. From its center, a shout went out. "Saaalimbee!" The others replied, "Yeah!"

"Salimbe!" "Yeah!"

"Salimbe!" "Yeah!"

The call and response faded as the pack approached the finish, marked only by a policeman in blue pants and a yellow shirt. The women pushed on, unaware at first that this was the end.

They didn't realize it (or seem to even wonder), but according to my watch they ran the 1.1-mile route in 8:40. The chase pack followed in 9:00. As runners filed in, WFWI staff set up tents and served food. The policewomen crossed in 18 minutes, and the banner marchers finished in 23 minutes with Shannon.

Down by the lake, Shannon shouted through a megaphone, reading messages from people around the world, including Uganda, Mexico, Scotland, Japan, and the United States, who had sponsored the Congolese women in their run. "Your stories have forever touched our lives...we gathered in solidarity to honor your strength and courage...we will never stop caring," she read. She told them of women in New York City who ran five miles in the snow in their honor, and of people in Chicago who got up at midnight to run at the same time they did. In total, the run generated more than \$47,000. Since its inception, RFCW has collected \$650,000. That has enabled WFWI to nearly double its Congo program, which has aided more than 33,000 women.

Later, Shannon would admit that she'd feared the run might feel contrived, a Western woman imposing her culture on another. But the run had more of an impact on the Congolese

### HOME COMING

The day after the run, two of Shannon's sisters—M'mizinzi (with her five children, left) and Muhigirwa (above)—were back home.

women than she'd anticipated. "Somehow, women being able to help other women helps them feel powerful," she said.

Namburho stopped short of the finish because her arms hurt—her crutches were poorly padded. She said she went as far as she could because "if I can run on one leg, then everyone will know they can do something to help." All of the other women finished. M'mizinzi said she felt happy to be a part of something. "What helped me came from running," she said, "and so by running, I have helped others." Sifa Cizungu, a 21-year-old mother of three, crossed the unofficial finish first. "It was hard," she said, "but I told myself I must make the effort to show it can be done, that we can do it."

The sun came out. Women picnicked with peanuts, rolls, and sodas on the grass. They said they weren't tired from running, they felt blessed to run because others have run for them. The scene was quiet for a bit, then the singing and dancing resumed.

**T**he next day, Muhigirwa, a thin woman with a big toothy grin, washed clothes outside her wood house. Shannon came for a visit, and Muhigirwa explained that with the sponsorship money she had received she was able to buy wood and nine metal panels to add a second room to her home. She gave Shannon a tour, noting that now when it rains, she and her family (four children, three grandchildren) can sleep without getting wet. She talked about feeling like she accomplished something by running and about the importance of people around the world continuing to run for them. "Maybe one day, running will help one of my daughters," she said. After the two said their goodbyes, and Shannon headed back down the trail, Muhigirwa stepped to the ledge and called out, "Wherever you go, remember me." She waved and started to sing and dance, and then, as if reconsidering, she began to run in place instead.



To see additional photographs of the Run for Congo Women event in Congo and to find out how to support the organization, visit [runnersworld.com/congo](http://runnersworld.com/congo).