

# Idea Exchange

## She's better off in the long run

Bernadette Cooper decided not to wear her wedding ring Saturday morning.

Though she and her husband separated months ago, Cooper had continued to wear the band. But Saturday, as Cooper got ready to run the Huntersville Half Marathon, she left the ring behind. The band had been loose on her finger, and she didn't want it to fall off while she was running.

Saturday's race wasn't Cooper's first half-marathon, but it turned out to be an unforgettable one, an exclamation mark on what has been one of the most difficult of Cooper's 42 years.

She first put the ring on her finger on Oct. 10, 2010 — her wedding day.

"Things started falling apart soon after that," she says.

Cooper soon discovered a side of her new husband she hadn't experienced during their courtship. She quickly learned — the hard way — that he was bipolar and verbally abusive.

Cooper, her now-13-year-old daughter, Savannah, and her new husband moved from Virginia to Huntersville in July. The move was stressful enough, but her husband's behavior soon complicated Cooper's life even more.

"The day that his behavior escalated from verbal abuse to physical abuse, I was done," Cooper says. "There was no turning back for me, especially since I have a daughter to raise. He didn't seem at all remorseful over his actions and I'm not the type of woman to stand around for something like that."

Her husband's work had brought them to Huntersville, so now Cooper found herself in a new place, with no job and a teenaged daughter to raise. Just a couple days after moving here, Cooper wandered into Fleet Feet Sports, the running specialty store in Birkdale Village. She soon enrolled in Fleet Feet's 10K (6.2-mile) training program and, after completing that, signed up for the store's half-marathon (13.1-mile) program.

Saturday's Huntersville Half

Marathon was the culmination of Fleet Feet's half-marathon program. For Cooper, though, the run was a baptism of empowerment. Though she'd been a runner for years, Cooper hadn't been running much before moving here, so she wasn't sure what to expect Saturday.

What she got, she says, was "an emotionally charged run."

As she ran, Cooper felt the curses of the past year loosen their talons. The doubts that had dogged her now escaped as surely as the sweat that beaded on her face before evaporating into the cold morning air.

The Old Testament words of Isaiah played on a loop in her brain.

*... those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

"With each passing mile, I just starting getting more emotional," Cooper says. "I am doing this. I AM DOING THIS."

But the "this" Cooper was doing was more than running, and the real contest extended beyond 13.1 miles.

"I was conquering some real demons out there," she says. "I found out I'm tougher than even I thought I was."

### Choices

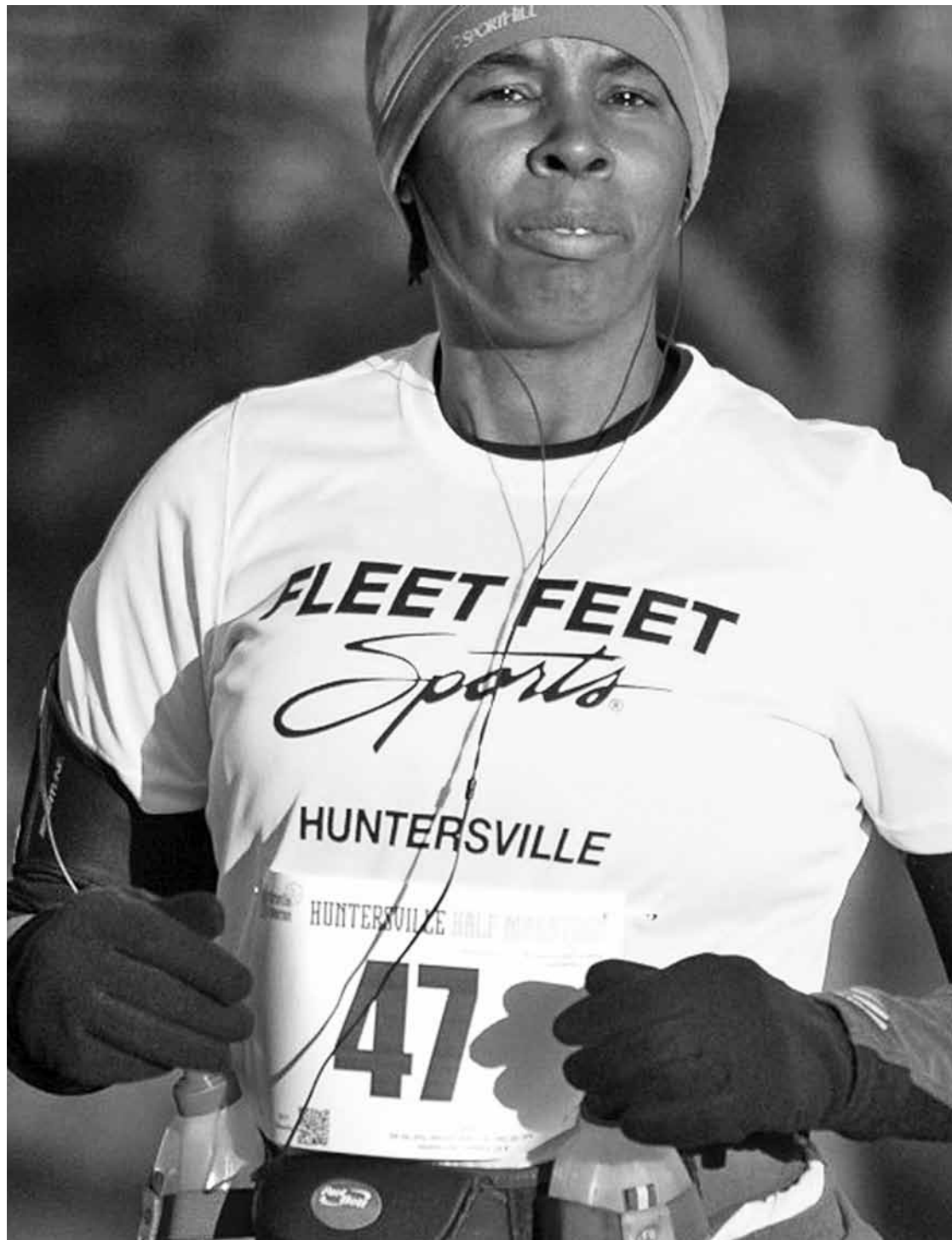
As Cooper approached the final miles Saturday, her Fleet Feet coach, Christina Eicher, ran with her.

"When we were running the last few miles of the race, we were talking about how much she has been through this past year and how great she felt to have worked the program and now run the race," Eicher says. "Throughout the whole process, I was inspired by her because no matter what people say, you have choices. When life challenges you, you have a choice to do something positive or you have a choice to give up and complain about how unfair things can be. She is a great example of someone living life through the good and the bad, and having an infec-

### Final thoughts



John Deem



COURTESY MATT WILLIAMS

Bernadette Cooper finished an hour behind the first-place woman in the first Huntersville Half Marathon Saturday, but 'I feel like a winner,' she insists.

tious, positive attitude."

And Cooper is living. She's working as an administrative assistant at Dixon Hughes Goodman, an accounting and financial advising firm in Charlotte. She's made new

friends, found a church family, and feels like she and Savannah have found a new home.

As Savannah joined her for the last mile of the race Saturday, Cooper saw her life for what it was.

She wasn't just enduring. She was thriving. And she was doing it on her own.

And that wedding ring?

"I haven't put it back on," she says.