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Foster's owner runs for cancer

Marathon effort in memory of mother

By **JASON WRIGHT**
jwright@northfulton.com
www.northfulton.com

MILTON – Though he'd always been an athlete, Foster's Grille owner Michael O'Keefe never imagined he'd run the 26.2 miles required of a marathoner.

But he found the strength, through tragedy and hope, to complete the Walt Disney World Marathon Jan. 13 in Orlando, raising \$5,000 in the process.

"Before I did this, I was just the typical corporate guy," he said. "You know, wanting to do charity but you don't make time."

That mentality changed when O'Keefe's mother, Margaret, was diagnosed with leukemia. She passed in August 2007 at 67.

During that time representatives from Team in Training, a fundraising organization that runs or swims for donations as part of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, visited him at Foster's Grille asking for help.

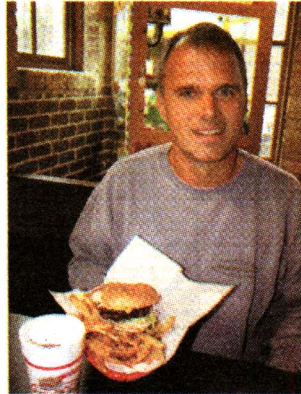
Now in its 20th year, Team in Training has raised more than \$800 million for blood disorder research and trained more than 340,000 participants.

O'Keefe immediately started holding fund raising events at Foster's, giving 10 percent of the night's proceeds to the group. Soon he was one of them, training to run himself.

"After seeing my mother and others suffering, you really start to understand," he said. "Luckily, the restaurant gave me the avenue to do it."

Alley Pickren is a campaign coordinator with Team in Training North Fulton.

Marathoning is not something everyone is cut out for or even wants to do, she said. But O'Keefe's heart



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Michael O'Keefe, the owner of the Foster's Grilles at Bethany Bend and Crabapple, enjoys a well-deserved Charburger after running the 14th annual Walt Disney World Marathon in Orlando Jan. 13 for cancer research.

was in the right place, said Pickren.

"You're just excited you get to meet him," she said. "He added a lot to the team – his teammates looked up to and respected him."

Pickren said one of the best parts of working with Team in Training is creating special bonds with the people who run.

"It was very special to see him cross the finish line," she said.

But it wasn't easy.

"When you're coming around that 22nd mile, you're tired, your whole body hurts," O'Keefe said. "Your mind plays tricks on you, so it takes all your focus to think about what the patients go through."

Those inspirational stories include a man who underwent 400 hours of chemotherapy, including a five-day coma. He still found the strength to run a half-marathon.

Another involved a parent who was running in memory of a young child who died of leukemia.

"My mother died at 67, she had a pretty full life," he said. "But I can't imagine a child who hasn't had the chance."

He said though painful, the triumph of finishing what seemed to be an impossible task was ultimately very enjoyable and rewarding.

"It brings you closer to their struggle," he said.