

The Rewards of Being a Falmouth Road Race Host Family

By Olivia dePunte

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The Sterns' Story:

When Lew and Jean Stern picked up Silas Kiplagat from the expo, they were delighted to experience their town through fresh eyes. From the endless ocean views to the lobster dishes, “Everything was new to him.”

After first arriving in Falmouth, he posed with arms open wide in front of the ocean to snap a picture for his family back home. Kiplagat supports his family and 10 people from his village back in Kenya with his running career. From sharing in his story, the Sterns agree the best part of opening their home to elite runners is, “You learn so much from having different people from different experiences in your home.”

The Sterns have been hosting elites since 2017 – including women from New York and Arizona and two women out of NYC, one from the U.S. and the other from Ireland. It’s been “extremely rewarding and educational” to meet people from all different walks (or in this case, runs!) of life.

They’ve been a part of the race long before being a host family, since Jean works in the medical tent and Lew has been slinging hot dogs at the expo for years. They both emphasized, “the more you get involved with the race the more fun it is.”

Laura Jones' Story:

Laura Jones also started hosting around the same time, in a spur of the moment decision after receiving a Falmouth Running Club email. “I, of course, had just gotten a new puppy and had an old dog and didn't have a whole bathroom finished. So for some reason, I decided that was a perfect time to have a professional runner in my home.”

Biya Simbassa didn't mind – he settled right in on her couch with the dogs as if he'd lived there for years. And after that first race, he has come back year after year to stay with Jones and her dogs.

“I asked him why he picked this race and he said it was for the reputation it has in the running community,” said Jones. “So I think he came in with a really super positive, excited attitude

about the race. I came in with the same and then we just sort of connected and chatted about running life, politics, living in a beautiful place and all that kind of stuff.”

This year, he’ll be back for an extra couple days after the race for some more time to enjoy the beaches. He has no fear when it comes to experiencing “Cape Cod Summer” – from the outdoor showers to the lobsters. Jones laughed, “He had the guts to try lobster for the first time on the Friday before his race the first year.”

Their routine goes something like a Friday pick-up from the high school, and a Saturday devoted to rest, where he’ll let her join in on a warm up run, a big carb dinner, and early to bed. Then the big day Sunday starts early, when she drives him to the buses in the morning and wishes him luck. “The first year I tried to ride my bike too so I could see him at different places on the race course,” said Jones. “I saw him at mile four and then rode my bike as fast as I could to get to the finish, and he still almost finished before me. So now I just go to finish.”

This race she’ll be at the finish line rooting for him to take first. “Hopefully he’ll take Ben Flanagan this year. No offense, Ben, you’re a delightful person, too, but let’s see.”

The Serbuns’ Story:

Dave and Nancy Serbun have also felt more deeply invested in the race since becoming a host family 11 years ago – but prefer to enjoy race day from the comfort of their air conditioned home. Due to Nancy’s condition, their spacious and sun-lit home is also 100% accessible for the wheelchair athletes they host.

Dave agrees with the other host families: “The best part is the people we’ve met and I know first hand that everyone who has stayed with us has appreciated it.” They’ve related to racers from a variety of backgrounds, but “Everybody in a chair is not there for the same reason.”

Their first guest was 20 year old Jill Moore – a two-time winner of the wheelchair division with Spina Bifida. Moore was good friends with Brett Gravett, a soccer player at Penn State who had a skiing accident the winter break before the race and ended up in a chair. Six months later he was racing.

After Moore won that year, she didn’t come home. “We were like parents waiting up for them, then around one a.m. we got a text from Jill. She’s out at Liam McGuire’s with Brett ‘partying with the Kenyans.’ ”

“We’ve made a lifelong friend. She even said, ‘I don’t care if you host other people, I’ll stay on your deck.’ ” That was also the year they met Jeff Bauman, the Boston Marathon victim made

famous by the photo with his cowboy-hat wearing savior. He lost both his legs in April and came to the Road Race in August as the starter.

After that, Gary and Lisa Brendel have claimed their home for the past seven or eight years. Gary was born with brittle bone disease and despite being in his 60s now, he's always been a strong competitor.

Gary's race weekend routine looks the same as any other elites'; he comes back from the race Sunday to watch the recap that the Brendels' tape and inhale their leftovers from dinner the night before. Dave laughs every time he thinks of that post-race tradition: "It's the highlight of our summer, we will keep hosting the Brendel's as long as they'll have us."

Nancy agrees, "They're just normal people, he's really an inspiration that way." The wheelchair athletes have their own community – and the energy is palpable. "When you see the wheelchair racers all in one place you can just feel the cumulative energy - they all know each other, they're all happy to see each other, it's like a family."