



Above: Bereket (left) from HOPE International and Tilay Photo: Randall Peters
Below : Run for Water 2011 Photo: Deanna Frere



Joline Olson is a teacher who cares about the world. She is a board member and race director for Calgary Run for Water (see calgary.runforwater.ca). Joline lives passionately, seeking to let her head hit the pillow each night with as little regret as possible.

Kilometre 17

by Joline Olson

The number of syllables in a haiku poem. The “coming of age” age if you’re at Hogwarts’ School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The atomic number of chlorine. The number 17 is many things, but for this runner, it has become more than the hardest kilometre of the half marathon

Kilometre 17. I’m not yet a marathoner, so I can’t speak for anything beyond 21.1. I can say that kilometre 17 of my first half marathon was where my desire had it out with my pain. There was a hill at kilometre 17. *Will yourself to do this, Joline, and dare your body to follow* was my only recourse. At that point in a half marathon, I knew the pain was nearly over, and it was at kilometre 17 where I found out how much I wanted it. Soon, it was all over and I found myself standing at the beer tent with a cold one in my hand, smiling about how great the experience was.

I found one kilometre 17—12,000 feet up a mountainside in southern Ethiopia—that was not joyous. This kilometre 17 was one in the journey of several young girls who I met who were responsible to fetch water for their families. As I stood in the hot sun, looking across the verdant Great Rift Valley, I marvelled at their kilometre 17. It was only the halfway mark; their journey then demanded that they haul the water 17 km down the mountain. For the unlucky ones, the trip would happen a second time in the afternoon of the same day.

I began to think differently about my kilometre 17. I have had the luxury to sign up for an event that rewards effort with celebration and accomplishment. Those Ethiopian girls receive survival for their efforts. A mere twice a year, I see a kilometre 17 and I feel proud of what I have accomplished. It is a milestone for me.

And what of those whose survival depends on seeing a few kilometre 17s every day? In watching the work of HOPE

International, the development agency with which I visited Ethiopia, it was clear to me that I was not being told the whole story. I heard about global water issues, and I heard some solutions. When a girl’s village has access to clean water, she becomes healthier. Her family grows healthier food, and water-borne diseases are nearly, if not entirely, eradicated. Hours in a day, which were once spent hauling water, are now freed up for her to possibly go to school. Micro-enterprises may appear in her village and her family may gain a means of sustaining themselves. What I hadn’t considered—and this is the part that I needed to travel 12,000 feet up the mountain to discover—is that a child’s safety and dignity and, sometimes, his or her life is preserved when a village receives access to water. Every kilometre 17 that a girl sees in a day means that she is 17,000+ metres away from her home, often deep in a forest, perhaps within the reach of harm. Incidents of rape and kidnapping are not uncommon for the women, girls and boys who fetch water; it is a risk taken daily for survival’s sake. I discovered what the village faucet means for the person who thinks nothing of kilometre 17 and everything of safely getting back home with the water she was sent to get.

I want more people to not have to see kilometre 17, unless it’s in a race. I want individuals and families and gardens and villages to thrive because they have a faucet only metres away from their homes. When I see kilometre 17, I consider it a grand gift that my only real concerns are the stitch in my side and the burn in my hip flexors. I want to honour the efforts of people I met in the hills of Ethiopia by working toward a solution to their circumstances. Join me and 1000 other Calgarians in the Calgary Run for Water on Saturday, September 8, 2012. Leaving Eau Claire, we will cover unique 5K and 10K routes along the Bow River, raising funds and awareness for those who survive only because of the kilometre 17s that they face. 🗨️

