

Medford's Tufts University races for a cause

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Fri Nov 06, 2009, 12:00 PM EST

MEDFORD -

A community-wide event held over the weekend managed to raise both money and awareness for a country nearly 7,000 miles away.

Race4Rwanda, a 5K race held Nov. 1 on the Tufts campus, brought a wide variety of Tufts students and faculty together and helped raise \$2,845 for the African nation and two local charities.

The funds raised at the race will be given, in part, to the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village in Rwanda.

This past summer, a group of Tufts Hillel undergraduate students traveled to Rwanda on a service program organized by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Their trip took them to the

Agahozo Shalom Youth Village, which provides a home and source of education for orphans of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.



Wicked Local Photo by David Sokol
The Rwandan national flag is displayed near the track during the Tufts University Race4Rwanda 5k road race.

Tufts students interacted with students from the village, and last week's race was their way of staying in touch and raising money for the program.

"The race was spectacular, and it couldn't have gone better," said Benjamin Gittleson, a junior at Tufts majoring in international relations who was the student coordinator for the Rwanda trip. "The weather was unseasonably warm and beautiful. Not only did we raise a ton of money for a group of amazing young people in Rwanda ... but we raised awareness for their story, the story of the genocide and of the incredible Rwandan people that are fighting so hard for the future of their country."

Gittleson, who visited Rwanda over the summer, said more than \$12,000 has been collected in the past nine months for the cause. He said last weekend's race was the result of a collaboration between many different groups.

"Overall, it was a spectacularly successful marriage of raising funds and awareness for charities here and across the world, and we couldn't have done it without a wonderful core group of student organizers here at Tufts, guidance from Tufts Hillel, the lead sponsor, and dozens of co-sponsors at Tufts and in the surrounding communities," he said.

The race took participants, some 240 in total, on a 5K course around the university's Medford/Somerville campus. After the race concluded, several speakers talked about their personal experience with Rwanda and the genocide.

Speakers included Tufts senior Erin Taylor, who was a member of the groups of students who visited Rwanda, and Patrick Karuretwa, a student at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts and a Rwandan genocide survivor who fought in the Rwandan Patriotic Front.

The day's events concluded with the playing of the Rwandan national anthem. In addition, dozens of members of the local Rwandan community came out to teach people about their country. Educational booths were also set up throughout the day for various community organizations.

"We tried to put a big focus on education, and I think we met with a lot of success on that front," Gittleston said.

Gittleston added the race is not intended to be an annual event, but having another similar event is not out of the question. He said his trip to the African nation left quite an impression on him, as it did for the other students who visited Rwanda.

"It is a country grappling with the legacy of genocide, which occurred unfathomably recently, just over 15 years ago," he said. "An uncomfortable attempt at normality has settled on the villages and farms of Rwanda are rolling green hills, and, despite all that, the country exists as a shining example of progress and modernity. The challenges it has overcome are unbelievable."



The start of the Tufts University Race4Rwanda 5k road race.

In addition to raising money for the Agahozo Shalom Youth Village, race organizers decided to help two local charities as well. Both the Medford Family Network, a family support and parenting education program that is accessible to Medford public school students and their families, and the Welcome Project, of Somerville, which seeks to strengthen civic and community life by reducing racism and empowering the city's refugee and immigrant population, will receive funds as well.

Gittleston said he was pleased with the turnout of the event.

"Race participants varied from freshmen at Tufts to the university president and his wife, as well as mothers pushing baby joggers and Medford and Somerville kids running with their parents," he said. "Somerville Alderman Jack Connolly also went above and beyond in helping us navigate the bureaucratic waters of running a major event on public property."