



Galing Pinoy showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit—the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, Galing Pinoy literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



Jose Nebrida Marathon Machine

by JOSEPH PIMENTEL / AJPress

67-year-old Fil-Am runs for victims and heroes of 9/11

THEY call him Captain America. Filipino-American Jose Nebrida will run his 166th marathon when he participates in the Los Angeles Marathon on Memorial Day, May 25.

The 67-year-old former social worker and school administrator from Chicago will be wearing his stars and stripes tights and "50 marathon and DC" t-shirt. And like years past, he'll be carrying the American flag while he runs the 26.2-mile race.

Nebrida, a short Filipino with sterling gray hair and dark eyebrows, started the tradition of carrying the American flag while he raced after the infamous September 11, 2001 attacks on

America. His goal is to run carrying the flag in all 50 states.

"I'm still doing it," said Nebrida, now a track and field and Cross Country coach at Northside College Prep High School. "I've done 35 states now and hoping to finish it in two years."

Running with the flag and recognizing the victims and heroes of 9/11 were also his way of paying back for what the US has given him.

Nebrida is originally from San Juan, Rizal in the Philippines. He immigrated to the US in 1975 when he was accepted to pursue his Masters degree in Social Work at the Loyola University Chicago. After finishing that degree, he completed two more Masters degree in education, he said.

Working as a social worker and serving as a school administrator for the gifted, it seemed that all was well. He was living the American dream—married with children and owning a home.

However, inside he felt down and depressed.

He admits during that time he was living an unhealthy lifestyle. He smoked two packs of cigarettes a day, ate horribly, and was drunk every weekend. He knew his family had a history of heart disease. His marriage was collapsing and he was neglecting his children.

The final tipping point happened when Chicago police officers went to the home to escort Nebrida out. He had a heated verbal exchange with his former wife, which led the latter to call the police on him. As he was walking out, he remembered seeing his two young teenagers. "Both of their faces had a lot of pain and suffering," he said. He lived briefly in his car for nine days, brushing his teeth and washing up at a nearby McDonalds.

It was then he knew he had to change.

"I was already at the bottom of things," said Nebrida. "I felt that if I kept on living and wanted to be happy I got to do something. I got to change my behavior. If I don't change my behavior, I don't think I'd last long."

Staying positive
He called a friend, seasoned marathon runner, Dr. Ernie Billups.

Billups was firm in his approach.

"He told me, 'I'm going to help you out and I'm going to be your Master Sergeant in the Army. You're going to follow everything that I'm going to tell you to do. The first thing you need to do is the big D. Discipline,'" recalled Nebrida.

Nebrida's first tasks—wake up every morning at 4:30 and walk a block and back.

Nebrida was taken aback but desperate. He followed his friend's advice.

It was too easy, said Nebrida.

"I called him back three days later, asking him what the heck was going on. This is too simple," said Nebrida.

Again, his friend reiterated – don't question, don't argue, just do it. He'd explain in due time.

After a month, his friend broke down the simple exercise to him.

"You have negative patterns of behavior, negative habits of smoking, drinking and anger inside of you. So I wanted to change that pattern to positive ones. We wanted you to get out of your negative addiction to a positive addiction."

Nebrida bought into it. At the age of 44, Nebrida became a runner.

Every week, Nebrida would increase the distance of his walk. Finally, he mustered up enough courage to run a 5k, that lead to running a 10k run before long he was completing his first-ever marathon later that year.

"I ran it in 4 hours and 52 minutes," said Nebrida. "My mentor Dr. Ernie was at the end of the line. We were hugging each other, jumping up and down and I was crying like the dickens. I said this is fantastic."

After that first marathon, he continued to run.

He ran eight marathons the next year then he decided to run a marathon in all fifty states. He achieved that goal in 1997. By 1998, he had run 100 marathons. The most marathons he ran in a year were 19, in 2000, to "say good bye to the 1900's."

9/11
Nebrida remembers exactly where he was and what he was doing during that infamous 9/11 attack on America.

Escorting gifted children to a school bus, a friend approached him and brought him to watch the news.

"The building was collapsing already. My heart sank," he said.

After 9/11 happened, he wanted to give back and help in any way.



AJPress Photos by Joseph Pimentel

At first, he gave blood but there was only so much blood to can give, he said. He donated to charity but a school administrator's salary wasn't going to make a big difference.

So he decided to give back the best way he know how—by running in every state carrying the US flag to honor the victims and heroes of 9/11.

"It was one good way to pay back the generosity of Americans who have helped me," said Nebrida. "They gave me a chance and an opportunity to get educated and gave me a chance in this country to prosper. I said to myself, 'I think I'm going to run a marathon in every state carrying a US flag.'"

The first time he carried the flag to a marathon, he was given a flag too big. For 26.2 miles in New Hampshire he carried an 8x5 foot flag, the flags that are usually in front of a school.

As he was approaching the finish line, a fire truck passed by and stopped to watch Nebrida. Local cadets saluted Nebrida. And when he crossed the finish line in last place, he was taken back the hall to meet the rest of the 173 marathoners where he received a standing ovation.

His motto "God Bless America. God Bless you."

Since he began running with the flag in 2001, he's received a lot of media attention. He's graced the cover of a number of newspapers including the Juneau Empire, St. Louis Post Dispatch, and Tompkinsville News in Kentucky, among others.

Setbacks

On his way towards his goal, Nebrida has had several setbacks. After an Oklahoma City marathon, he suffered his first heart attack that required an emergency triple bypass surgery.

"They found one artery 100 percent clogged," said Nebrida. "Two arteries had 95 percent blockage."

His cardiologist urged him to stop running and to "stay in bed and rest." He couldn't do that. He fired the cardiologist and got a second opinion. His second doctor advised him to continue running so after a six-month rehab, he ran another marathon. He suffered his second heart attack a few years later. This time, doctors placed stents (a wire to prop open an artery) in his heart.

This time, doctors told him to keep running.

"I really believe when I stop running is when I pass on," he said.

Nebrida said that he only has a few more states left before accomplishing his goal of carrying the US flag while running the marathon in every state. He said because of his age, he knows he doesn't have a lot of time left. He said he has one dream.

"My dream is I see the more than 3,000 victims and heroes of 9/11 over there and shouting God Bless you Jose. God Bless America and then carry me on there shoulders and present me to God." ■

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