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Barron, Team Continuum running with a purpose

Group of some 300 strong raise money for cancer patients

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Who knows if Team Continuum would be as big as it is if Cherie hadn't gotten sick right after Paul. Who knows if the charity would exist in its present form.

Maybe Dr. O. Alton Barron wouldn't have kept pushing the group. As the most experienced runner among the 12 original team members, the Irvington surgeon was a driving force. Had his sister not gotten sick right after Team Continuum was created, had she not died three years later, who knows what Barron would be doing right now.

It's because of the way things happened that he's

running the ING New York Marathon on Sunday against his own surgeon's recommendation. It's because of the way things happened that Team Continuum has over 300 runners and has raised almost \$4 million in five years. It's because Paul Nicholls came to his hospital in 2003 as full of enthusiasm as he was full of cancer, followed shortly by Barron himself diagnosing Cherie with the same type of cancer.

"Dr. Barron is very insightful," said running partner Bryan Leek. "It saddens him but he's accepted it. It's very important for him to turn something into a positive. He's turning his experience and difficulties with cancer into helping people understand it better and know about the disease."

Paul Nicholls came into Barron's life as a patient at St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital.

Barron, the Fordham athletic physician, is an orthopedic surgeon at the CV Starr Hand Surgery Center at the hospital. He was part of the team that took care of Nicholls when he came in to be treated for multiple myeloma.

Multiple myeloma is a cancer that begins in plasma cells, a type of white blood cell. It eventually collects in bone marrow, causing bone pain.

Barron quickly made friends with his patient, a man with tremendous spirit. Not long after, he made a trip to his native Austin, Texas, to deliver a eulogy at his uncle's funeral. His sister Cherie, there for the funeral, was experiencing some eerily similar symptoms. As an uninsured artist she hadn't seen a doctor.

At one point she broke her arm just by lifting a garbage bag. Barron felt her arm and

detected lesions, a telltale sign of multiple myeloma. He knew instantly what was wrong.

Later he would undergo a stem cell transplant, something he believes gave her another three years. Nicholls, though, offered him a chance to help the cause every year.

Team Continuum, a product of the patient's imagination upon entering the hospital, consisted initially of himself and his doctors. They ran the New York Marathon in 2003 even as he was receiving chemotherapy.

The idea of the group was to raise money for all the non-medical costs incurred by cancer patients and their families. When people think of cancer care, they often don't realize the peripheral expenses, like renting hotel rooms to visit stricken family in another city.

"He was an absolutely unbelievable man," Barron said. "He came up with the idea almost instantaneously. My partner walked down the hall and said, 'Alton, we're running the marathon.' He had that way. He was the kindest, gentlest, but arm-twistingest guy you ever saw."

Barron, a veteran of seven marathons already, needed no convincing. He ran that marathon alongside Nicholls. He ran again in 2004 and 2005. He ran in 2006, five months after his sister passed away.

In 2007 his running career abruptly ended. While playing basketball in the Irvington gym he suffered a Lisfranc fracture-dislocation to the arch of his foot. Even after recovery, his surgeon told him he could no longer run long distances. He skipped the 2007 and 2008 marathons.

But on June 4 of this year,

three years and a day after Cherie died, Nicholls did too. And Barron, 49, could no longer watch the marathon from his couch.

Recently he went on an 18-mile run with Leek, a fellow at the CV Starr Center. When Barron found out Leek had been a runner at UC San Diego he told him in no uncertain terms that he'd be joining Team Continuum, and he'd be running the marathon alongside him. Barron reported no ill effects from his long training run. He's vowed to run at an 8-minute mile pace on Sunday, which works out to a time of about 3:30.

"The fact that he's still running marathons with that type of injury is amazing," Leek said.

"Many people would not be able to run a short run much less a marathon. For an athlete it's a career-ending injury."