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COMMENTARY

Flag flies along U.S. 1 on a journey of soles

Coast-to-coast relay `a little thing' born from big inspiration

By TOMMY TOMLINSON

ROCKINGHAM -- It's 4 in the morning on U.S. 1. Nobody up but truckers and possums.

Except here is a guy in front of the Shell station north of downtown. His name is Dave Collins. He grew up in Rockingham and he came back from his home in Roscoe, Ill., to run through the streets in the frost-caked hours before dawn.

Here come his partners now.

Maybe a dozen runners are cushioned by a police escort in front and behind. Three guys tote an Army banner. A local track club strides in step. A few folks straggle in back.

The runner in front holds an American flag.

Dave Collins jogs off the curb and into the pack.

"Hey, guys, what's going on?" he says. "Pass me that flag when you can."

For the past week, runners from all over America have relayed this flag as part of a trip from Boston to Los Angeles. Two of the hijacked flights on Sept. 11 left from Boston, three were headed to L.A., and so a bunch of airline workers and military people organized a flag run between the two cities.

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They entered the Carolinas late Tuesday, ran down U.S. 1 all Wednesday and Thursday, and are supposed to cross into Georgia about 1 p.m. today.

They're raising money for the victims of Sept. 11. But the volunteers - including many from the Charlotte area - are also making their own quiet stand, with steady footsteps in the middle of the night.

They have decided to run toward something instead of away from it.

Now it's 5 a.m. on the south side of town, and eight Charlotteans join the pack.

There are three mother-daughter pairs - Carolanne and Annelise Shelton, Lucie and Lauren Tonon, Cissy and Ashely Hurteau - plus Stephanie Herivel and Madison Durrett.

They are smart. They brought four bikes. So they switch off, running and riding, as the highway slides from town into countryside.

The pack is trying to do 10-minute miles, which translate to 6 mph, but they struggle to go that fast. So they create an odd little traffic jam on the two-lane highway, crawling past foggy farm ponds and kudzu-coated trees.

They don't expect to see a soul this early, but the souls come out. Two women in their bathrobes wave from their porch. Another has set up a table for free coffee and breakfast.

At sunrise, a farmhouse door opens and a woman walks out with a bucketful of water bottles.

"People just want to feel like they have a chance to do something," says Ron Horton of Charlotte, who ran a nine-mile leg Wednesday and took pictures Thursday. "Running a flag from one place to another doesn't technically affect anyone's life.

"But it does."

Now it's 7:30 a.m. and the North Carolina crew starts up the last long hill. Up top, at the S.C. line, new runners wait - six highway patrolmen, a couple of veterans, one guy with a Purple Heart.

The first thing they see is the top of the flag. They jog down a bit to coax the runners up the hill. The Charlotte group of eight has ditched their bikes. They wanted to do the last stretch together.

The women and girls are sweaty and cold and giddy. They ran their leg. They held the flag.

"Sometimes you just have to reach out for something, even if it's just a little thing," Carolanne Shelton says.

The last stars give way to a crystal morning. At the top of the hill, the runners gather for a picture.

They light sparklers.

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Want More Info?

For details on the Flag Across America run, or to donate, call (800) 272-3286 or visit www.flagrun.org. Donations go to several charities serving the victims of Sept. 11.

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