



BY ISI IBARRA

Exceeding Expectations is a program in San Bernardino, Calif., “that serves an inner-city population and is designed to encourage at-risk kids to move their lives in a positive direction, using the sport of triathlon as the

vehicle. The goal is not to develop the kids into elite athletes, but rather to offer them opportunities to participate in a lifestyle that is healthy, goal-oriented and very unlike that which they experience in their everyday lives.”



Meeting Cherie Gruenfeld and joining Exceeding Expectations was the spontaneous act of a 10-year-old who would later discover that it would lead to countless opportunities.

One day my fourth-grade teacher spoke to the class about a multi-time Ironman world champion who was right outside our classroom and looking for anyone interested in going for a run. I decided that running around outside and meeting a world champion was better than another regular day in class, so I shot my hand up like people do when they badly want to be chosen. Outside, Cherie was surrounded by eager children who were waiting to impress her, myself included. I ran lap after lap until she told me to stop. After the run, I vividly remember her treating me like someone more mature and responsible than I perceived myself to be. She asked if racing was something I would be interested in and then allowed me to decide right then and there whether committing to being an Exceeding Expectations team member was something I was ready for.

This was only the beginning of those kinds of interactions with Cherie. In fact, she was the only person who constantly made me feel like I could make decisions about my future while making it clear that I would have her unconditional support. Having a role model like her helps me believe in myself and my dreams.

Of course, Cherie’s vision for members of Exceeding Expectations is bigger than that of becoming star athletes. It is to become so accustomed to setting goals that it will become part of all areas of our lives. At 11 years old, I set a goal to earn a trip to San Diego to run the

Lee Gruenfeld

half-marathon in the Challenged Athletes Foundation triathlon. I accomplished that goal, which proved to me that I could do anything in life if I set goals and never gave up.

The confidence I gained from being a part of Exceeding Expectations is responsible for my proudest achievements. I am always ready to meet new people, explore new places and learn new lessons. During my high-school years, I was on the varsity team for cross country and track and field where I gained immense knowledge about running while also offering a unique perspective for those who did not understand the benefits of cross-training. My coaches would use me as an example of what my teammates should do on the weekends since they knew I had my triathlon races on the weekends. I know I would never have appreciated these sports as much as I do if it were not for Cherie coming to my elementary school so many years ago. I consider myself lucky to have lived my high-school years waking up at four in the morning to run, logging in 70 miles of running per week to prepare for one race, and to binge watch *Without Limits* until I accomplished a new personal record. All of these things contributed to who I am today, and they were influenced and entirely supported by Exceeding Expectations.

After graduating from high school, I decided to continue running at Riverside Community College, where I also could not have been any luckier. The coaching staff was brilliant and reminded me very much of Cherie; one of my coaches there helped me discover a new passion, steeplechase. With only five months of training, I qualified for the Orange Empire State Championships, where I helped my team score points. Eighth place never felt so good. There is no doubt that my experience with triathlon helped prepare me to do well at the steeplechase event.

Once the collegiate season ended, I was in great shape. Now in my early 20s, I found myself heading to Exceeding Expectations annual summer training. It was exciting to see the younger kids try to run my pace and follow along for as long as they could. It helped me understand



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RIGHT
Cherie Gruenfeld runs with a young Isi Ibarra

my place as an older team member of Exceeding Expectations and how I could step up to be a role model for them.

Although I am no longer a match for the elite 10- to 12-year-olds currently on our team, I still let them know I am there for them – even if I’m not next to them on their runs. It is great to see my role come full circle. It has shown me that I should always strive to be the best version of myself because it might help someone else. With all the support I have received from Exceeding Expectations, giving back is a responsibility that I am honoured to have.

Fast forward to what will be a year to remember: 2020. Now 25 years old and a member of University of California Riverside’s class of 2020, I am the first in my entire family to graduate from a university, a life-altering accomplishment. Through the challenges in the sport of triathlon, Exceeding Expectations helped mold a life-changing perspective, teaching me to make goals, believe in them and work towards accomplishing them no matter what comes my way. Essentially pushing the boundaries of what is possible in life, even when paths are uncertain. Exceeding Expectations makes it possible to have something to hope for and be proud of. The unconditional support I have received from them is like no other. It is very clear to me the importance of having resources that are invested in positive change. I have gained so much understanding from having support that I will always strive to make a positive change, just as Exceeding Expectations did for me. **T**

You can follow Isi Ibarra at @morethanamedal.ie.