

'I run for Ollie': Uncle of Eudora boy who died at day care found strength, healing through running

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Ryan Ortiz held an "I Run For Ollie" flag as he finished the Kansas City Marathon in October of 2017.

It was the dead of night and Ryan Ortiz was in the last stretch of his longest run to date: a 100-mile race on the Prairie Spirit Trail.

The race started in Ottawa at 6 a.m. the day before. Ortiz had run south through small Kansas towns, reached the halfway point in Iola and turned north to retrace his steps. As he passed the 80-mile marker, the 37-year-old was mentally drained and could feel his muscles giving way.

It was 2 a.m. The other runners were spread way out. Ortiz was in the dark and in his own head.

"I know you can help me out here," Ortiz thought. He was talking to his nephew Ollie, who died five years ago.

Ollie is the reason Ortiz started running and the reason he crosses finish lines. And when Ortiz needs extra help amid a grueling run, Ollie is the one he turns to.

"You try to think of positive stuff, so of course I had Ollie on my mind. I've always used him," Ortiz said in a phone interview with the Journal-World on Tuesday. "When I was 80 or so miles in, I had nothing but time to talk to him. He always helps push me a little bit."

Ortiz was not much of a runner prior to Ollie's death. But since 2017, he has run at least one marathon a year for Ollie. And two weekends ago, he completed the 100-mile race in just over 25 hours. What started as a coping mechanism has turned into a passion, and Ortiz's wife, Kaila Ortiz, said it has helped him heal.

"I think that (running) is one of the ways that he can be with Ollie without being with him," Kaila said.

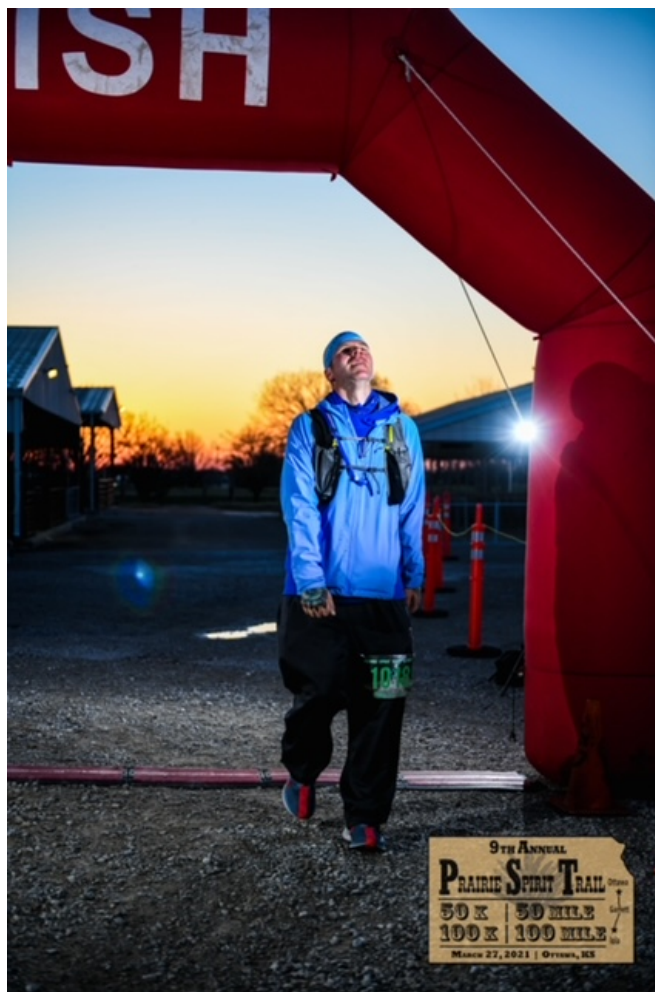


photo by: Contributed Photo

Ryan Ortiz is pictured crossing the finish line after running 100 miles at the Prairie Spirit Trail race in March of 2021.

A marathon a year

Oliver “Ollie” Lynn Ortiz was 9 months old on Sept. 29, 2016, when he died at a day care in Eudora. A day care employee was convicted of second-degree murder in his death and is serving a nine- to 10-year prison sentence. Ollie’s parents, Rob and Kaylen Ortiz, are still struggling to get answers on what exactly happened to their son.

After Ollie’s death, Rob and Kaylen started Ollie’s Toy Box, which they are in the process of registering as a nonprofit. Ollie’s Toy Box provides essentials such as clothing, diapers and baby formula in addition to toys for families in need. Since starting Ollie’s Toy Box, Rob and Kaylen have helped about 50 families in Eudora, Lawrence, Pratt and Chanute, Kaylen told the Journal-World in an email.

Ortiz decided to start running to raise money for the toy box. Kaylen said she remembered “being brought to tears” when Ortiz asked if he could run as a fundraiser. The first marathon Ortiz ran for Ollie was the 2017 Kansas City marathon, and he raised over \$13,000.

In 2018, Ortiz ran the Wichita marathon, followed three weeks later by the New York City marathon, followed two weeks later by the Tulsa marathon. In 2019, he ran the Chicago marathon, and two weeks later, he ran the 50-mile Prairie Spirit Trail race. Of course, in 2020, most races were canceled, but Ortiz was still able to run a marathon in Ottawa.

“I wanted to keep my yearly streak alive for him,” Ortiz said of Ollie. “I didn’t want to let the guy down.”



photo by: Contributed Photo

Ryan Ortiz, right, is pictured next to his nephew Christopher Ortiz after finishing the New York City marathon in November of 2018.

Ortiz always wears blue when he runs for Ollie, as well as a blue and white reminder band — weathered by years of runs — that reads “I run for Ollie.”

Ortiz is not the fastest runner on the block — at least, not fast enough to qualify for the Chicago and New York City marathons. Yet he keeps getting the lucky draw and being admitted via the selective lottery system. Ortiz thinks it’s because of Ollie.

“Well, Ollie wants us to go to New York,” Ortiz said he told his wife when he was admitted to the New York City race. Chicago is similarly difficult to get into, and not only did Ortiz run it in 2019, he’s also been admitted via the lottery system for this year.

In total, Ortiz has raised about \$25,000 for Ollie’s Toy Box throughout the years. Anyone interested in donating to the toy box may do so by writing to Ollie’s Toy Box, P.O. Box 115, Eudora, KS 66025.

‘A few more miles’

Ortiz’s favorite race was the first one he ran for Ollie, the 2017 Kansas City Marathon.

He didn’t really know what he was doing, he said, so there were a lot of battles and a lot of time to think about why he was running — “It was really emotional.”

Two miles from the finish line, his wife secretly gave Ortiz a blue flag with a picture of Ollie and an “I Run For Ollie” hashtag. He stored it in his pocket. Then, about 50 yards from the finish line, he pulled out the flag as he ran by Ollie’s parents, Rob and Kaylen. Kaylen said she was sobbing and completely surprised.

“We were cheering louder than ever and Ryan caught us on the sidelines and stopped running,” Kaylen wrote. “(He) came over to us and just hugged Rob and me so tight.”



photo by: Contributed Photo

Ryan Ortiz stopped before the finish line at the Kansas City Marathon in October of 2017 to hug his brother, Rob Ortiz, and sister-in-law Kaylen Ortiz.

The blue flag now hangs in Rob's and Kaylen's house. After the race that day, Kaylen and Rob went to Ollie's grave to tell him about his uncle's performance.

"Only when we arrived we discovered that Ryan had beat us to it," Kaylen wrote. "There on Oliver's graveside hung Ryan's KC Marathon finisher medal, with a special note penned on the back of it."

Ortiz still delivers all his medals to Ollie after his races. They are kept in a waterproof box next to the grave.

Rob Ortiz said Ryan is his hero and that he's been amazed by all he has accomplished.

"It all means the world to us, not only the running and money raised but the way he and Kaila are always there for us no matter the need," Rob wrote in an email to the Journal-World.

Ortiz says running is now a big part of his life and that he keeps finding a new limit to push. He hopes to run the 100-mile Prairie Spirit Trail again and improve his time. He is also interested in trying an Ironman triathlon.

He said his races for Ollie have inspired others to run. Ortiz and Kaila organize a 5K for Ollie every year in Chanute, where they live. Anyone interested in following Ortiz's races can do so by viewing the Facebook

page “Ryans Run for Ollie.”

In difficult moments like the one Ortiz had two weeks ago 80 miles into the Prairie Spirit Trail, Ortiz said he thought of Ollie’s family. He reminds himself that his physical pain from running will never compare to their emotional pain: “If they can keep going every day, what’s a few more miles for me?”



photo by: Contributed Photo

Ryan Ortiz and his family are pictured after he finished his 100-mile race on the Prairie Spirit Trail in March of 2021.