

More From Our Coaches

Annie Connelly: I started in 2017 because this program struck me as very unique. It seemed like an incredible opportunity to experience the power behind running in a very impactful way. Being a part of this program has had a huge impact on me and my running as well, seeing these women who are starting from nothing, starting at Ground Zero, and not only deciding to change but then putting it into action, one can't help but be inspired by that.

Ellyn Brown: I didn't start running until I was 29, and began running 5k and 10k road races. I joined a women's running group which was life changing, having other people to run with made it so much more fun. I have always been a hiker, and when time became valuable, being a mother, I adapted my running to take me into the mountains, as I could get up and down faster if I ran instead of hiked slowly. I love the peace and the beauty of running in the mountains; it's a commune with nature that revitalizes me so much.

When I broke a toe and couldn't run for a while I was devastated, but a friend talked me into buying her road bike, as I could bike without impacting my toe. I loved the biking too. A knee injury took me to a doctor who told me to take up swimming to strengthen the muscles around my knee, and to ease up on the running. I learned to swim and flip turn in the pool at age 40, and I was hooked on swimming too. This all led to moving into triathlons, which have been a big part of my life too.

Along the way I discovered orienteering, a sport where navigation and exploring the wilderness without trails, really got me excited. To add some mental skills to running skills was very much fun, as the fastest runner doesn't always win.

I started coaching with RFA from its onset, and have found it to be so inspiring and rewarding. Seeing women take to a sport and get so much strength and positive impacts from it, is wonderful. It's so good to share such a positive activity and see it help people.

Karen Williams: I started coaching in 2014...my first year of retirement! I didn't start running until my thirties. Started with 5ks and eventually, in my later 40s, began ultra-running. I've completed over 20 100 milers and multiple marathons, 50 milers, and 50ks. Running has taught me about persistence, overcoming obstacles, and believing in myself. It has brought a community of healthy, vibrant, and caring people into my life. I love sharing the gift of running with others-especially the incredible woman at Hiland. Running truly is life-changing in so many ways...and I see that with the runners at Hiland. Once the women are a part of the Running Free program, they begin to find an inner strength many didn't know they had. It is inspiring to watch them develop their skills, building self-confidence and the knowledge that **THEY CAN DO IT!** They become runners-stronger emotionally and more powerful physically....it is incredible to be a part of that!!!

Megan Davey: Megan moved to Anchorage in 2019 as a Jesuit Volunteer/AmeriCorps Member with Partners for Progress, a nonprofit that supports therapeutic courts around the state and operates a reentry center for folks being released from incarceration. In recognizing the value of a healthy and reliable support network both within institutions and upon release, Megan was drawn to RFA as an opportunity to immerse herself in the fun, uplifting community of strong women before they leave Hiland in the hopes of a smoother transition out of Hiland.

Pam Barbeau: I retired from my Human Resources career in 2015 and began a new “career” as a volunteer, first, and still, as an ESL teacher with Alaska Literacy Program. Then, in 2017 I was invited to join the RFA coaching team. RFA offered a new opportunity to this runner of almost 50 years to share my love of running with runners and runner-hopefuls behind bars. It has been rewarding for me and a learning experience for both me and the runners! My biggest “aha” has been how “normal” most RFA runners are at heart, and how smart and talented.

Patty Bielawski: A life-long Alaskan, Patty started running at age 12 at the request of her younger sister who needed some company cross-country running. She’s been chasing her sister’s back ever since including running/getting lost in the Chugach Mountains behind Anchorage before they were a park. Patty has a deep love for the natural world and prefers trail running and backcountry marathons to any other running. But...she’s learned that her coaches are right- track and speed work make the other running easier. Patty has participated in many races and marathons but her only prize is for talking the most during her track interval workouts

Patty enjoys coaching in the Running Free Program and occasionally teaching yoga at Hiland. She’s found that time together at Running Free practices reminds both coaches and runners of the physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits of a dedicated physical practice like running. She’s as inspired by the Running Free participants as they may be by the coaching staff and is grateful to know them inside and outside of Hiland.

Sarah Kleedehn: I have been a Running Free coach since the summer of 2013. I began running when I was in my 30s. Due to working and having a family, I didn’t get serious about running until I was in my 40s. I love running. Running keeps me in shape, provides time to reflect on life, and grants me the opportunities to make many friends. I always feel better emotionally and mentally after running. A day without running is like a day without sunshine for me. I run about 5 days a week and 30-40 miles per week. However, I have discovered the wisdom of taking rest days as well. I love Running Free Alaska. It is very inspiring to see women who have never run start running, improve, and learn to love running. I love Running Free workouts feeling encouraged and happy from the efforts I observe from the participants. The participants give their best and strive to improve. It is a joy to be their coach.