

HOW I LIVE UNITED: Hanna Henson

University of Arizona (UA) Wildcats distance runner Hanna Henson knows a thing or two about dedication. There is often nothing glamorous about being a distance runner; it requires a level of dedication and sacrifice not many are willing to give. In order to improve, runners have to invest in tempo runs, punishing mile repeats and sprints up hills that leave quadriceps shaking. Blisters, black toenails and shin splints are as commonplace as sunburns in Tucson. Sometimes, being a distance runner hurts – plain and simple.



Yet despite the oftentimes-grueling pain and injuries associated with training, Henson loves running and is committed to her sport. She probably runs more miles in a week than some people drive. Over the years, her dedication and love of the sport have been rewarded with an Arizona State Cross Country 4A-II Championship and five Arizona State runner-up finishes in cross country and track and field, in addition to the honor of being named the 2007 “Arizona Daily Star” Cross Country Runner of the Year, as well as the FOX 11 Game Time Athlete of the Week in November 2007.

While only a sophomore, Henson is already a consistent contributor for the Arizona Wildcats cross country and track and field squads. At the Pac-10 Cross Conference Championships, Henson obliterated her previous personal best by shaving 42 seconds on her way to finishing in 21:30.73. Her stellar performance did not go unnoticed by UA assistant coach Erin Rodrigo, who noted that had it not been for Henson, the Wildcats would not have had nearly as good a day. Last fall, with the help of Henson, the UA women’s cross country team qualified for the NCAA National Championships for the first time since 2001.

And while dedication to the sport is a necessity with running, Henson continuously displays an unwavering devotion to her community. A native Tucsonan, Henson’s childhood was filled with community service. She remembers taking evening strolls with her family and picking up aluminum cans along the side of the road. Through her church, a young Henson spent Sunday afternoons pulling weeds and cleaning the yards of elderly church members.

“As a kid, I also helped with food drives and served Mother’s Day meals at the Crossroads Mission in Nogales, [Ariz.],” Henson said.

In addition to earning varsity letters in cross country and soccer during her formative high school years, Henson also served as the vice president of the Interact Club, an organization that was sponsored by the local Rotary district.

Henson helped steer Interact Club projects like river cleanups along the Santa Cruz River, proms for senior citizens and shoe drives for the needy.

When she is not at practice, competing for the Wildcats, in class or studying, Henson is doing great things in the community.

“As a student-athlete at the University of Arizona, I believe it is my responsibility to give back to the community that supports my teammates and me,” Henson said.

In addition to being a winning team, the UA cross country squad is also the catalyst behind the University of Arizona chapter of FeelGood—a nonprofit organization that teams with the Hunger Project in an effort to “end world hunger, one grilled cheese at a time.” Henson is the brains behind the UA chapter, which serves free sandwiches while informing people of the group’s goal to raise awareness and money to support the fight against world hunger. FeelGood has become very popular on the UA campus and has raised several hundred dollars for the malnourished. For every dollar the group raises, the Hunger Project tacks on an additional 20 cents, and all the proceeds go to combat world hunger.

Henson is also passionate about working with youth and helping them discover their academic potential.

“In my position, I believe I can be a positive role model and convince youth that their opportunities are endless as long as they work hard and believe in themselves,” Henson said. She is also concerned about the epidemic of obesity and type 2 diabetes among youth and spends time promoting exercise and healthy eating habits among teens and young people.

Henson has many meaningful memories from her volunteer experiences, but one that sticks out in her mind occurred one night while she and a teammate were eating dinner at a local pizza joint. After having their fill of pizza, the two began studying at a small table in the middle of the pizza parlor. Two slices remained on the pan.

“This feeling came over me, and I had a sudden instinct to offer the remaining slices to a man near the entrance who appeared to be homeless,” Henson recalled. At the risk of offending the man, she walked over and offered him the pizza. He snatched the pan and began devouring the pizza, not even taking the time to fully chew it.

“A sense of relief came over me; I will never forget how his radiant face thanked my teammate and me as he exited the building,” Henson said. “This is a moment that has remained with me and serves as a reminder that no one should pass judgment on a stranger because you have no insight into his internal struggles.”

Through hard work, determination and compassion, Henson has made both running and volunteering natural extensions of her life. Her dedication and self-motivation are shining examples for all residents of Tucson.

What does LIVE UNITED mean to you?

“LIVE UNITED is the vital connection between individuals within a community. Every individual, regardless of occupation, socioeconomic status or gender, holds a unique piece to this connection which works toward the improvement of all.”

Hanna Henson, University of Arizona Distance Runner