

A photograph of two runners, a man and a woman, seen from behind as they jog along a dirt path. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong backlight effect and long shadows. The man on the left is wearing a dark vest over a light shirt, and the woman on the right is wearing a red jacket. The background shows rolling hills and some trees.

# Samantha

and her golden glowing heart

by Sabine Martz



Samantha loved moving forward.

"I can't wait to be a big girl!" She chanted as she jumped around in her backyard when she was little. Samantha's thick braid danced on her back, and her mother loved watching her mucking around.

"Really? And why do you want to be a big girl so badly?" Her mother asked. "Hmmm", her braid stopped bouncing as Samantha, arms akimbo, planted her feet and contemplated, "because then I can do big things!"

"Sweetheart, you might be little, but you are mighty. Whatever you set your mind to do, you will accomplish. I just know it!"

There was something inside of Samantha that would push her to do great things. It was glowing in her heart, a faint flicker at first, but it was growing along with her. One day, it would grow so big that it would burst out of her chest and shine a bright light on everyone around her.

"I can't wait to ace this test!" Samantha told her mother when she was at University, doing mock exams and working on practice papers. "Sweetheart, you've been working on these papers for hours! You should go stretch your legs, burn off some steam and go for a run."

Samantha's mother leaned over her and kissed her cheek, hoping her daughter would forget her exams for a little while, and just enjoy being outside and breathing fresh air. She knew that little glow in Samantha's heart needed sunlight and a hug from the warm summer breeze.

"But mum, nobody's going to pass this test for me. I have to put in the work myself if I want to get good results," Samantha objected. For someone as ambitious and determined as Samantha, the toughest critic, the most judgmental of all judges was herself.

"Please just give it a try. Go for a run around Lysterfield Lake and then you can get right back to it. I promise you, you'll be invigorated and your brain will thank you", said Samantha's mother smiling. Samantha loved moving forward so much, but sometimes it was good to slow down. Samantha reluctantly agreed and, groaning, put on her running shoes.

As she was tying her laces her mind kept wandering to the exam papers and the pressure she put on herself kept mounting. But as her shoes hit the ground and her heart started pumping faster, Samantha understood what her mother meant. For some, running is a beautiful process that allows them to move forward, to cover a distance and feel a deep sense of accomplishment. But Samantha was running as a means to hit the "pause" button on everything else, and to enjoy the run itself.

"Mum," she said upon her return from Lysterfield Lake, sweat beading on her forehead, "although I was literally moving forward on my run, the thoughts in my head were quiet and I realized something..." she paused. Her mother walked over to her and gently tickled her under her arms:

"What did you realize, sweetheart?" she teased. Samantha giggled and fought off the tickles. "I realized that amidst all the moving forward I'm always trying to do something, I am always trying to achieve, and I forgot how to stay still and live in the moment." They hugged in the kitchen and Samantha whispered thank you to her mother.

For Samantha, running became something she did for herself as a way to find stillness and forget the little worries and cares that sometimes weighed her down. But it did not stay that way for very long.

By the time Samantha ran 222 kilometers non-stop through the Himalayas, the glow in Samantha's heart had gotten so big and so vibrant, that it could no longer be ignored. She decided, during those long days of pounding the ground, and navigating difficult terrain, that she needed to make a new running goal.

**"Running long distances is something I love to do for myself, but I want to do more with it," she told her mother when she got home, "I want to run for others."**

Her mother nodded and said: "I always knew you would do great things, Samantha. What do you have in mind?"

Samantha had been pondering about this a lot during the many hours on the trails. The hills rolled by as she conquered new ground and the trees melted together as she became part of the landscape that surrounded her. She was little, she thought, but she was mighty.

"Mum, I know I've been so lucky in life and I'm so grateful for it. But I've been thinking about what my life might have been like if I had grown up in a place where girls aren't as lucky as I was" It was a sad thought that had been bothering her. She fondly remembered jumping around in her backyard, going to school with her friends and learning new things every day. Some children in the world never got to do that.

"I always did really well in school and worked hard at it, and my hope is that one day, all the girls in the world can get the support, opportunities and education that will help them create better lives for themselves." The thought of somehow helping make a difference in the life of one, two or a thousand girls in the world made Samantha's heart swell and the glow in her chest swirled around in excitement.

**"Mum, I am going to combine my love of running with the aim of helping others!"**

Samantha tackled her new goal like she tackled everything else she set her mind to: with fierce determination and preparation. Running was still part of her new goal, but now she would also raise funds to help children and bring awareness to problems that plagued girls and boys in different parts of the world.

Samantha approached both her ultramarathons and her fundraising efforts the same way she had approached exams and papers in school. She spent months physically and mentally readying herself for her long expeditions, running increasingly long mileage, and completing strength training, yoga and recovery work. It was never an easy task and some mornings (especially the cold ones!) were tougher than others, but the harder it got, the more intensely the glow inside her heart shone to remind Samantha why she had decided to begin yet another journey.

One day, after Samantha had finished her 3.5-day long race through Australia's Simpson Desert and raised over \$30,000 for Save the Children, a girl with two little braids had a question for Samantha who was doing a presentation at her school.

"I love to run," she started, "and it helps me clear my head. But why do you run so far and for so long if it's not just to clear your head?"

Samantha was glad to answer.



**“When I do something for myself, it feels great and I enjoy it fully. But then it’s over and I’ve only done something for one person. When I do something for other people, it’s as if they fuel me and I fuel them. It never stops, it just keeps moving forward.”**

As the kilometers pass, the glow in Samantha’s heart keeps shining brightly, and now it shines in so many other hearts, too.

## Samantha Gash

Samantha took up the sport of running in 2008 as a break from study while she completed her degree at University. By following a 16-week program, she just managed to complete the Melbourne Marathon that year – side by side with a friend. Motivated by the experience of pushing her mind and body beyond what she thought was possible, Samantha took the ultimate challenge and entered the ‘4 Deserts Grand Slam’. Four 250km ultra marathons across the driest (Chile), windiest (China), hottest (Sahara) and coldest (Antarctica) deserts in one year. Samantha’s view on what she was capable of changed forever from this point. With an increasing desire to push the physical envelope even further, the following year Samantha found herself entered into a 222km non-stop run across the Himalayas. This race required Samantha to run at 6,000 metres above sea level, in an event that had only been completed by one man. This was by far a tougher experience and Samantha was lucky to somehow survive the pain, sickness, extreme heat and then white out conditions to complete the race. The penny dropped during Samantha’s journey across the Himalayas that she wanted to use her capacity to run long distances for a reason outside of herself. The following year, while working as a lawyer at Baker & McKenzie, Samantha ran 379kms non-stop across Australia’s Simpson Desert. Receiving national attention, the run took 3.5 days and nights to complete and raise over \$32,991 for Save the Children Australia. Within two months after returning from the Simpson Desert, Samantha co-organised a fundraising community running event on behalf of Turia Pitt and Kate Sanderson – victims of the Kimberley ultramarathon bushfire. They raised over \$40K to support their continuing rehabilitation and to be split between the two ladies. In September 2014, Samantha faced her biggest challenge yet where she ran an average of 61kms for 32 days in a row across South Africa (1968kms in total). The project titled Freedom Runners, raised over \$55K on behalf of Save the Children to set up a initiative in South Africa. The program commences on 1 March 2015 and supports young women in a specific rural community to have greater access to feminine hygiene products, which is a limiting factor to education. The program is holistic and also includes educational awareness on the importance of schooling, health and hygiene.



**How did Samantha's story make you feel?**

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**Is there a sport or an activity you enjoy that makes you feel still and calm and in the moment?**

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**What are some ways you could help others through your favourite sport or activity?**

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