

Guest column by Elizabeth Mandel: AAUW's Wildflower Run celebrates 40 years raising funds for girls

AAUW members' goal is to ensure everyone in the community can participate in the fun.

Published in the March 8 - 21, 2023 issue of Morgan Hill Life



Morgan Hill Life file photo/Susan Brazelton



Elizabeth Mandel

The annual Wildflower Run celebrates its 40-year anniversary March 26. The Morgan Hill branch of the American Association of University Women is proud to have created this legacy event for our community.

This athletic event is one of the largest runs in the country that is still completely organized by volunteers. Close to 200 AAUW members and community volunteers pitch in to make it a success.

One hundred percent of proceeds go to causes in support of gender equity. During the past 10 years alone, we have donated more than \$500,000 to a broad range of local scholarships, STEM camp for middle school students, community grants, leadership programs for women and girls, and more.

Looking back, they had a bit of a rocky start. In its second year, it almost came to an abrupt end when a disgruntled resident pointed a gun at the 300 women running by his home on Watsonville Road. The undaunted organizers relocated the event to Live Oak High School where it has thrived and grown. We've raised funds for the empowerment of women and girls for 40 years through local scholarships and grants.

From its origins as a women- and girls-only race, the Wildflower Run has expanded. In 1988, we opened events up to men. In later years we ensured there was something for everyone.



In addition to a Kids' 2K, a 5K Walk, a 5K Run, and a 10K Run, we introduced in 2012 a unique stroller/baby jogger 5K race, complete with "bonus" baby-tees for the stroller tots. This event was immediately a hit, drawing 76 participants in its inaugural year.



Photo courtesy Susan Brazelton
Travis Finucane came in first place in the 5K stroller/baby jogger category with a time of 20:27 in last year's Wildflower Run.

A few years later, we added a Senior 2K on the school track. By making the run accessible and diverse, AAUW members have achieved our goal of ensuring everyone in the community can participate in the fun.

The 5K stroller event led the Wildflower Run to international recognition in 2019 when Ann Marie Cody, a NASA research scientist, broke the Guinness 10K world record for a woman pushing a triple stroller. Cody was drawn to the Wildflower Run for her record-setting attempt because of the USATF Certified, flat, fast, stroller-friendly route and because she supported AAUW's mission of gender equity for women and girls.

The Wildflower Run has continually evolved during the four decades. We have moved from manual timing to chip timing.

We have also expanded our online presence, including a website, informative emails to participants, and active use of social media. (Go to www.WildflowerRun.org or follow us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/wildflowerrun or Instagram [@wildflowerrunmh](https://www.instagram.com/wildflowerrunmh).)

The pandemic did not slow us down. After pivoting temporarily to virtual runs in 2020 and 2021, we were able to provide a \$5K grant to Gavilan College's Student Emergency Fund in addition to our usual causes.

Charles Weston, a competitive runner and organizer of the annual Freedom Fest and Veterans Day runs, participates in the Wildflower Run each year with his family, including his daughters and granddaughters. This year he is considering the stroller run with his 15-month-old grandson.

"It's always a fun day running, talking with fellow runners, passing others that you know and getting passed, and having a good laugh with them after finishing," he said. "I love the flat course. And the constantly changing directions make it interesting. I think it's the most fun run on my running calendar."

In addition to a beautiful Morgan Hill run in the springtime with dozens of cheering course marshals, participants always enjoy one-of-a-kind annual T-shirts, bonus baby-tees for 5K Stroller tots, custom medals for all Kids' 2K participants, beautiful wildflower-themed medals for overall and age group winners, activities for kids at the Finish Fest, free downloadable photos, group and family discounts, and entertainers.

For our 40th year, our Roadshow will provide entertainment for runners along the routes. These include taiko groups, school bands, and several other performers. We have also added a school team competition. If you would like to run with your school, learn how at WildflowerRun.org/schoolteams.

In recognition of AAUW's sustained contribution to and positive impact on our community, AAUW was recently recognized as the Morgan Hill Chamber of Commerce's 2023 Non-Profit of the Year for its upcoming Celebrate Morgan Hill gala.

We are grateful for this honor and excited to be recognized for our contributions to the quality of life in the South Valley. The Wildflower Run and the funds we raise are essential to that contribution.

Come run with us as we celebrate our 40th Wildflower Run!