

After 30 years of running, exercise still fun

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Most don't remember the total eclipse of the sun that took place 30 years ago on March 6. Stephen Schuster does. It was the same day his second daughter, Michelle was born. It was also the day he strapped on running shoes for the first time. He hasn't stopped since.

"It was kind of a spiritual thing. It was like magic," he says of the day he got his athletic inspiration. "I thought, 'I'm going to get stronger for her, and she's going to grow for me.'"

Schuster's positive energy cannot be contained. It bursts forth like the bright rays of the sun rising over the Franklins — mountains he plans to run up and over as part of his 30-year anniversary celebration of being an El Paso runner. "Let's have fun with life," he says excitedly. "To me exercise is fun."

The 62-year-old ophthalmologist is fit and trim — the picture of health, and then some. But this wasn't always the case.

In the beginning, Schuster was an overweight smoker whose main form of exercise consisted of turning the pages of his medical-school books. He became a runner before the term was fashionable and couldn't run very far without stopping to huff and puff. "I'd throw on a pair of sweats and Keds, and people would stop and look at me," he says of his early days.

"But I could tell after just two weeks that I was improving. By six weeks, I could run about a mile a day. It's interesting how much you can gain by pushing your body a little." He gradually decided to make changes in his diet, too, not so much to lower his weight but to increase his overall health. In fact, his wife Elodia tattles on him about his average daily food intake: a breakfast of two slices of cinnamon bread washed down with a glass of grapefruit juice; a 10-cracker and diet-soda lunch; and a bit more filling dinner, featuring a heart-healthy menu of fruits and vegetables, along with grilled or

baked chicken or fish. But Schuster says he is a regular kind of guy who still likes to work in the occasional sweet roll and dessert. This way of life is what keeps him energized, he says.

And energy is what he needs to keep up his daily schedule. He's in the office each day by 4:30 a.m. to read medical journals and is seeing patients less than three hours later. Sometimes his interactions with patients start in the middle of the night, when they call him at home with questions or concerns. He credits cat naps - one in the early morning and another at the noon hour — for giving him the second wind which takes him through till quitting time around 4:30 p.m.

That's when Schuster slips into his running shoes.

After all these years, Schuster keeps it to an even pace of running two miles on most days - maybe up to four or more on others. He rotates his athletic shoes every 1,000 miles.



On the road again Dr. Stephen Schuster

Part of his secret is religiously sticking to his daily schedule - even on vacation. "I make running part of the vacation. It's part of making it fun." He missed his daily run less than a dozen times last year.

He also believes in dedicating every run to someone before he walks out the door — maybe to a sick friend or a child. "Tuck it into your heart and take it with you for inspiration." Usually while running, Schuster tries to solve a problem or visualize reliving a fun event. "It can be very spiritual."

Schuster's favorite spot to run is in Ruidoso. He climbs up to Alto Village and winds back down through the golf course before heading back to his cabin.

"I've never injured myself or missed a day of work." This, he says, is because he's never pushed himself. "You can just feel some of the aches and pains" and know when it's time to stop for the day, he explains. He adds that most adults starting an exercise plan should see their physician for a check-up.

"I think that exercise is the foundation of all physical and mental well being. If I, as a physician, can set an example, I think that's important."

And Schuster comes from a long-line of El Paso physicians. His father, Stephen Sr., provided eye care to areas residents from 1918 until his death in 1972. His grandfather, Micheal Schuster, began his El Paso medical practice in 1896 and became the Southwest's first ear, nose, throat, and eye specialist.

He was one of the original founders of Providence Hospital, and a street was later named in his honor.