



Running the Good Race:

The Monique Nunes Story

By Beth Foreman,
Features Editor

Sitting in the sunroom of her Baltimore, Maryland, home with a glass of iced tea and her right foot propped up on an office chair isn't where Monique Nunes is accustomed to finding herself. After all, she's a mother of five, a school administrator, and a woman with a worldwide mission. She's also married to the Rev. John Nunes (President and CEO of Lutheran World Relief), and she's beginning to travel all over the world sharing the unique joys of his ministry.

Monique is known for being fast, in fact one of the fastest on the track. She still holds two track and field records — 110 outdoor hurdles and the 60 indoor hurdles — that she set while a student at Concordia Seward. Monique described her victories as “humbling and awesome. God blessed me with the gift to run, jump, and leap. I knew it was the unity, strength, and the help of the Lord that enabled me to achieve this goal.”

Right now she has slowed down — in part due to recent foot surgery — but also to visit with me on the phone, reflecting and sharing her perspective on families and her work in this fast-paced 21st Century.

“Today's families are living with a different tempo compared to years ago,” she said. “Fami-

lies were more insulated then. They were not bombarded with technology, mass communication, and media.” She explained that mothers, fathers, and children weren't running around with cell phones, 24/7 access to high-speed Internet, and streaming live videos of the latest disaster across the globe. Children did not usually jet across the country for job interviews and relocate thousands of miles from home.

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us ...

“The majority of the families grew up very close to where they were born,” she added.

Monique's own family reflects this faster-paced 21st Century tempo. Two of their five children live at home while attending high school and college. However, their three older daughters live far away from Baltimore, one in the Detroit area and two in the Chicago area.

And Monique herself has moved away from her physical roots. Born in Selma, Alabama, and raised in Chicago, Monique learned at a young age what it means to live a life of service.

“I'm blessed that my mom and dad were in the home with me, and they raised me with an extended family which was our church family.” Monique's father is a pastor (Dr. Frazier N. Odom, now Interim Executive Director of Black Ministry

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for the LCMS) who used to take her on sick and shut-in calls.

“Being a pastor’s child taught me so much. I did not know that I was in the ‘Hard Knocks University.’ It really showed me about life.”

The youngest of four children, Monique would go with her dad on his calls while her mother might be running the older kids to piano or baseball practice. “I found it fascinating to go with him and,” she added, “he would take me for a strawberry sundae afterwards!”

But she remembers so much more than the sweet treat. “In so many ways my dad and I left those calls with a blessing. We thought we were going to give a blessing to that person on a sick bed or in a wheelchair or in a nursing home. We always left blessed. It was a two-way street.”

From the time she was young, Monique knew she wanted to be a teacher. “I can remember going into the church basement where there was a stage. I would stand on that stage with a comb or a brush in my hand as a microphone, and I would just sing, sing, sing!” She laughed when she remembered those days. “I would bring my Barbies over and sit them in chairs, so I had my own little make-believe Sunday School going on. And that is how I knew I wanted to be a teacher.”

Fondly, she recalls watching her mother, a first grade teacher, draw smiley faces on papers. Her childhood homes were places where “there was always joy,” she said. “I grew up in the church, watching my family live the mission. Now I’m not saying we had perfectly happy days all the time,” she laughed, “but the joy of the Lord was always present.”

Who for the joy set before him endured the cross ...

Monique’s work has always centered on little children. With a strong Lutheran education in high school and college (Concordia, Seward, Nebraska, and Concordia, Ann Arbor, Michigan), Monique entered the workforce well prepared. “Going to Lutheran schools and universities really gelled my life.” She has been an educator for years, focusing on early childhood and most recently as a principal and an administrator at Baltimore Lutheran School in Maryland.

“The more children I’m around, the happier I am. And the smaller they are the better. I’m in hog heaven with kindergartners and preschoolers. I can do that all day long,” she said.

Monique’s running around begins early. “My day starts about 5:00 a.m.,” when she hits the ground running. “I’m not always faithful about waking up and praying or having my devotions first thing,” she admits. “Mid-day is usually the best time for me to get refreshed, to find time to meditate, pray, talk to God.” But that doesn’t always happen. Monique might be racing from a parent meeting to a staff meeting and then back to her office to handle stacks of paperwork. She’ll stay at work late, waiting for her youngest son, John Jr., to finish football or baseball or soccer practice.

And then, like a superwoman, she certainly goes for a 3-mile run, right?

Monique laughed, “The only real running I do now is to follow my son up and down the field — cheering — as he’s carrying the football for a touchdown!”

Yet Monique really is still running. It’s just a different race. “Running for the Lord,” she said, “calls for training, stretching, and strengthening the body towards a common goal.”

And similar to her track and field days, Monique still faces hurdles in this race.

“One of my biggest challenges is to find ‘Monique time.’ We want to serve everyone and then we look back and there’s no more oil in the lamp. So we have the challenge to feed ourselves spiritually when we are feeding everyone else. One way is to have some quiet, devotional time.”

Another big challenge is balancing family and a career.

“One time my children signed a petition that demanded I retire.” They said, ‘Mom, you put so much of yourself into your work, and when you come home, you aren’t a mom anymore!’ That was a real wake-up call for me!” she remembers.

It’s more than a balancing act. “It’s a ‘juggling act’, really. How can you keep all of the pins in the air?” A moment later, she changes her mind. “No, we don’t juggle ‘pins,’ we are really juggling eggs! And when one egg falls and cracks open, we try to put the pieces back together.”



Monique with husband, John Nunes

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles ...

Monique knows the right way to find a good tempo, to find the balance, to run the race. “Prayer. We work hard, we play hard, and we pray hard.”

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.



As an educator, Monique has worked with all kinds of families. “I deal with families where there are four parents, including step-parents. I deal with families where the grandparents are parenting. We don’t always have a mother, a father, a dog, and two

children at home anymore. And that’s the 21st Century. Period.”

Family is so much more than a mother, a father, and children living under one roof. “There isn’t one definition,” she said. “It’s more than blood relations. It’s a network of affiliation and care. It’s a group of people who share common attitudes, interests, goals, morals, and most of all their Christian values. And God needs to be at the center of the family. God uses family as a place where faith is taught and lived out.”

Monique’s own family is a blended family. “I have children that are my own, but they aren’t blood relations. I did not bear them. I have adopted them into my family just as God adopts all of us as His children.”

As a public school teacher in Dallas, Texas, Monique had many opportunities to extend her family and then to share Jesus Christ. “There were so many parents who were not in a position to take care of their children, so they became part of our family.”

She admitted that she broke the rules as a public school teacher. Although it was discouraged that teachers associate with students outside of the classroom, sometimes Monique chose to ignore those rules. “I broke the rules so that I could bring the Gospel to a lot of my students whose parents weren’t doing this. The parents worked on Sundays. So I became a part of their family by picking their children up for Sunday School. I built a bridge so I could share Jesus with those children.”

Monique explained that her school was right across the street from St. Paul Lutheran Church in Dallas, where her husband served as pastor. Her classroom windows overlooked the church. “Sometimes I would park at the church, and then my students would see me running back and forth. They’d ask, ‘Why are you going to that building? What’s in that building?’” That was an open door for Monique to tell them about Jesus.

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It’s about building bridges. “You build a bridge from school to church. You build a bridge from Sunday School to home.”

And then you run back and forth across that bridge, building the relationships.

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us ...

“I don’t know who first said this, but I believe that the best sermon does not have words. I wore my cross, but I couldn’t say much about Jesus. Yet if a student would ask me, I could share.”

Even though Monique works at a Lutheran school today, she still finds many opportunities for mission work. “I don’t have the exact statistics, but something like 20 to 30 percent of our students are not churched. We are definitely in the mission field right here.”

Working as the principal and now administrator at the middle school has opened Monique’s eyes even more to what she sees as 21st Century family issues. “Today, children and even adults have zero tolerance. They say, ‘I don’t really want to be bothered with you anymore, so I want out of this relationship.’ There’s very little forgiveness or ‘Let’s try to work this out.’ I see it every day when I meet with families. Children lash out at parents in ways that I would never have dreamed of acting with my parents. I’m appalled at the body language they use,” she said.

The reasons behind much of the family deterioration are complex. “Technology is not to blame. Social networking, computers, technology — these can be tremendous blessings. Recently, we interviewed for a new teacher. Half of the interviews were conducted over Skype. Even five years ago, we would have asked, ‘What’s Skype?’”

“Yet Facebook, Twitter, MySpace — these have taken away some face-to-face contact. I’m guilty of it! I can be downstairs cooking dinner, and my

daughter is within earshot, but instead she sends me a text, “Is dinner almost ready?” And I text her back! “Five minutes.”

In an effort to change the tempo of her own life and to spend more time with her husband, Monique recently transitioned from full-time principal to part-time administrator.

“John travels about sixty percent of the time, and I knew that he would when he accepted this job three years ago.” However, Monique soon discovered the stresses that resulted from her husband’s travel schedule and her responsibilities. “He’d be gone ten to fourteen days, and some days I would not get to talk to him. The technology just isn’t there when he was in the mountains of Peru or Africa or somewhere in Nigeria.”

So Monique decided to step back to part-time administrator, working Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, giving her the freedom to join her husband in his ministry. Monique learned that she could still use her gifts of teaching and singing to serve children all over the world.

“I am elated to accompany my husband on trips where he communicates the message of LWR and its work to end poverty, injustice, and human suffering. What I really like — and how it ties in with education — is that I am able to reach and to touch lives in so many ways.” Monique is eager to be involved in the quilt and the health kit ministries at LWR. “I will also be able to travel with John and play a vital role as far as going out to congregations for LWR Sundays, where John will preach and I will sing.

“It is quite a different path but a welcome one,” she said.

Monique is also excited to be involved in the Lutheran Malaria Initiative, through LWR, educating and raising awareness about the disease. This winter she will travel to Africa to teach families about using bed netting to slow down the spread of this disease.

“I’m eager to continue to be the sermon, not with words but with my hands. Being able to hold a child or read a book to him gives me great joy.”

Monique seems to find joy everywhere. “Being around my ‘little people,’ as I like to call them, brings me great joy. And of course, being married to John, my ‘earth angel,’ for seventeen years, has helped shape me into the Christian woman I am today.”

Next to her love for family, children, and teaching, Monique is filled with joy whenever she sings. “I

Monique

The training I endured in running track is nothing compared to what Jesus endured, fought, and won. When I consider what it says in Hebrews Chapter 12, we, as Christians, are in a “spiritual boot camp.” We are surrounded by other Christians training and striving towards a common goal — to “win” souls for Jesus. When I ran a race, I focused on my speed, stride, stamina, endurance, resistance, and determination to finish strong. Well, I now apply this to my walk/run for Christ. We fix our eyes on Jesus, who is in the stands cheering us on to finish strong. As we run to the finish line, we see Jesus (our coach) urging, pushing, and encouraging us to finish strong. We hear Jesus speaking, coaching us as we complete each lap. With this, we can run and not grow weary. And, if we grow weary, Jesus will carry us through. He can speak to storms in our life and say, “Peace, be still.” We can endure because He endured the cross not only for me, for you, for ALL! What a blessing to run the race with perseverance, knowing that Jesus is cheering us on. After all, we are on His team and what an awesome coach we have. What a mighty God we serve.



sing in the shower, I sing in my office, I sing down the hall, I sing in chapel. That is my life — singing — ever since I was that little girl with the make-believe microphone on the church basement stage.”

Monique described her singing as “therapy for my soul. Singing Bible verses speaks directly to me. We all have challenges, troubles, joys, and sorrows in our lives. Having a pastor to talk to you, listen to you, and minister to you is an awesome experience. However, when I can have a song minister to me as I sing, that is an experience that is priceless. Always, when I sing a song in church, at a retreat, in Sunday School or in my car, it tells a story — a story of God’s unconditional love, Jesus’ free gift of salvation, or the promise that is to come. It gives me hope, joy, and peace that He (Jesus) is with me now and forevermore.”

So that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

And without a formal introduction, Monique lifted her voice and sang. She started slowly and picked up the tempo. The words to “Great Is Thy

Faithfulness” moved along those high-speed cables across the country from the east coast to the west coast — in an instant. The words, the pitch, and the tempo were just right ... thoughtful, peaceful, graceful, just like a runner but in slow motion.

Even with her aching foot propped up on a chair, Monique Nunes continues to run the race along with countless others.

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.



the poor: intentionally building a relationship — sustainable and long-lasting relationships.

✪ Model those great sermons with your actions. Preach those great sermons with a hug. Deliver those great sermons by offering a smile of hope. Demonstrate those great sermons by holding a hand and walking with a friend in her difficult moments — and then you can take her hand and run with her in her joys!

✪ Service is a two-way street. Whether it's in your own backyard, in your

own house or across the globe, you have to go in knowing it's not a one-way street. You may be giving them quilts, health kits or fresh water, but I can guarantee, if you open your heart and your eyes, you will come away with a blessing that they give to you as well.

✪ No matter what you are going through, remember God is in the midst of everything. One of my favorite Bible verses is 1 Thessalonians 5:18: *Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* Yes, it's hard to give thanks in the tough times. It's hard to give thanks when the rains are pouring down, when the thunderstorms of life are tossing you about. But look around and see your blessings. And give thanks.

✪ Work for the Lord. The pay is out of this world! I heard these words on a voice message, and they really stuck with me!

In the Classroom with Monique: Her Lessons for Women Everywhere



✪ Find those places where you are uncomfortable and get comfortable. Reach out to the last, the lost, the least, and the left behind. Talk to someone you would not normally talk

to. And then try to do what I did in Dallas. Break the ice. Find something that you have in common. If you talk long enough, you will find common ground. Before you know it, you have a new friend; you have someone you can pray for and who can pray for you. Start building a relationship with those individuals. And that's what I mean by outreach to the lost and