

A woman with long blonde hair is running on the Great Wall of China. She is wearing a white tank top with a logo that says "blue planet run" and "2017", and dark shorts. The wall is made of grey stone blocks and has a crenelated top. In the background, there is a large stone tower with a traditional Chinese roof and a long staircase leading up a hill. The sky is hazy and green trees are visible on the hillsides.

# Water, water Everywhere

Alumna runs around  
the world to  
promote safe  
drinking water

Dot Helling '74 runs across a stretch of the Great Wall in China—just one of 16 countries she visited in an around-the-world relay, the Blue Planet Run.

BY ALEJANDRA NAVARRO

**D**ot Helling '74 ran 10 miles a day, for 95 days, her running shoes touching land in 16 countries. That's equivalent to finishing more than 36 marathons—about one every third day. Even for Helling, who at 57 is a competitive ultramarathon runner completing 50-mile and 100-mile races, this was a challenge like no other she had faced.

She ran to shed light on a dilemma like no other: the diminishing availability of safe drinking water.

Helling, a private practice attorney from Montpelier, Vt., was one of 20 athletes selected to participate in the 2007 Blue Planet Run. The event, billed as the first around-the-world relay run, raised money and awareness for safe water for everyone.

On June 1, the team representing 13 countries (Helling was born in Japan to German parents) began this 15,200-mile global trek at the United Nations in New York City. On Sept. 4 the group returned, greeted by a crowd of cheering friends and family at South Street Seaport. At the ceremony honoring the runners, Helling told the crowd, "Every member of our team is here and crossed the finish line—and we did it on time. It's just so amazing. I keep asking myself, 'Did it really happen?'"

Twenty-four hours a day, even in the middle of the night, a team member was on the road carrying a baton with the inscription, "water is life."

Over three continents, the runners endured drowning rain, sweltering heat, clouds of mosquitoes, and some dismal accommodations. And all along the route, both in the United States and abroad, they encountered blatant reminders of why they were on the road: brown tap water, water that smelled like oil, and water contaminated by manufacturing and agricultural runoff, Helling says.

Despite having to take a hiatus from her practice and say goodbye to friends, Helling considered these struggles and sacrifices small. She is not one of the 1.1 billion people in the world who don't have access to safe water, and she will likely not be one of the 6,000 people who die daily because of it, according to a 2003 report by the United Nation's Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council.

The team members didn't raise money individually, but instead, encouraged people to make donations to the Blue Planet Run Foundation. Last year, the foundation raised more than \$1 million for 11 non-governmental organizations that funded more than 135 sustainable water projects across the globe, including well digging and harvesting rainwater. "What has drawn me to this cause," Helling says, "is that this global problem can be easily remedied."

Helling came home to find that many people had heard her message. Friends and family kept tabs on her progress through her blog at [www.blueplanetrun.org](http://www.blueplanetrun.org). She motivated people to organize several

fundraisers and address water projects in Central Vermont.

"We have contamination and quantity issues, even in Vermont," Helling said. "It's not just in Third World countries, it happens here, too."

Catherine Gouvin '75, a classmate of Helling's who lives in Mystic, Conn., came out to cheer for Helling as she ran along the Thames River in Norwich, Conn. She was not surprised to see her Quinnipiac buddy take on this endeavor. "In college, I recall [that] she had the highest regard for nature and healthy living, and those things she has carried with her throughout her life," says Gouvin, an occupational therapist and ergonomic specialist at Lawrence & Memorial Hospital in New London, Conn.

"She values people tremendously and that came through in her law practice and in her undertaking this run," Gouvin says.

They attended Quinnipiac during an era when people wanted to be part of social change, Gouvin explains. Helling has proved it's still possible to make changes that can have a global impact. "I think she's a role model for people of our generation."

Like the relay, Helling's life is an example of endurance. She balanced several jobs on and off campus (working on the switchboard, in the psychology lab, and typing papers for extra money) and applied for grants and fellowships to pay for school and earn a bachelor's degree in psychology at Quinnipiac.

Helling began running while studying at the Vermont Law School. It was an inexpensive and convenient way to de-stress. She was a torch bearer at the 1980 Olympics, following in the footsteps of her father, Curt, who bore the torch representing his German village during the 1936 Berlin Games. After training for the 1980 Olympic torch relay, she began running marathons and in 1988, friends encouraged her to compete in her first ultramarathon.

Since then, she has completed more than 100 marathons, numerous triathlons including the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon, adventure runs in places such as Chile and Costa Rica, and more than 50 ultramarathons, in addition to climbing Mount Kilimanjaro and many other summits.

The relay run was a transforming experience for Helling. She recalls a baton exchange in Kansas City, Mo., where she invited school children on to the stage to wait for the baton carrier. The children, who had been studying water issues, began singing songs about water and when the runner approached, they began chanting, "Water is life."

"These kids really knew something about the importance of water," she says, pausing to absorb the memory of their spirit. "It gave me hope."

She is now eager to dedicate more time to other philanthropic organizations, particularly those in South America and Africa. Even though the race has ended, Helling never misses the opportunity to say, "Water is life, pass it on."

**Helling, center, celebrates with fellow runners in New York City after completing the run.**

