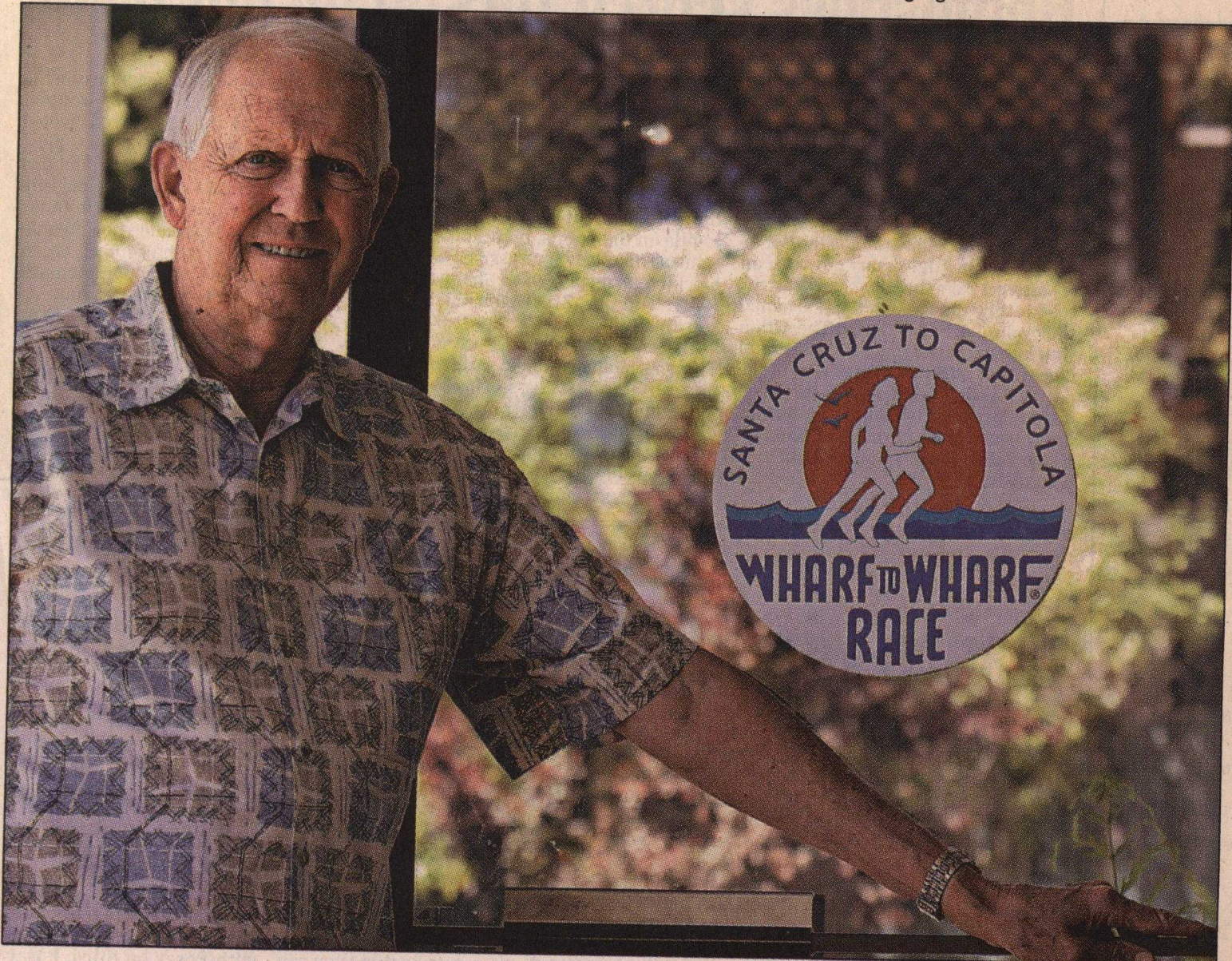


WHARF TO WHARF

'We all make a conservative effort to pass the baton for race leadership so it will be around 100 years from now.'

KIRBY NICOL, retiring Wharf to Wharf director on keeping the 40-year-old race going



After more than two decades directing the Wharf to Wharf, Kirby Nicol will hand over the reins after today's race.

SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

END OF A LONG RUN

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SOCIAL MEDIA: We want your photos and tweets from the Wharf to Wharf race. Mention @scsentinel or use #wharftowharf on Twitter or Instagram, or e-mail

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ONLINE COVERAGE: Wharf to Wharf map and detailed race information.

Live coverage includes photos, video, your tweets and posts and later video, slide show, complete results and stories from race day

Kirby Nicol directs his final Wharf to Wharf race

By ANDREW MATHESON

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Kirby Nicol refers to it as the "dirty little secret."

The longtime executive director of the annual Wharf to Wharf race, Nicol has never run, walked or jogged the six miles from Santa Cruz to Capitola in the annual Wharf to Wharf race.

He's been too busy running it from behind the scenes.

"It gets in your blood," Nicol said

earlier this week of the Wharf to Wharf, which kicks off this morning for the 40th time. "After a while, it's routine. It's a cycle."

It's part of his genetic code, he added, which is why he doesn't plan to stray too far. Nicol, who has been the race director ever since 1988 [he also held the position from '84 to '86] and been associated with the Wharf to Wharf since its inception in 1973, will step down from his post at the conclusion of this year's event, scheduled to begin at 8:30 a.m.

Nicol, 70, will become an advisor and remain part of the event, while assistant race director Scott McConville, 28, will take over Nicol's position for future races.

McConville, who is also the track and field coach at Aptos High, has been assistant race director for the past year and the elite athlete coordinator since 2009.

"For the past two and a half years I've been trying to teach him everything I know about road races. Next year, I'm gonna be Scott McConville — the old, bright-eyed-and-bushy-tailed assistant race director," Nicol said. "Any healthy organization has to look to the future ... and try to bring in new blood and

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NICOL

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maintain the ongoing success of the event."

McConville said he has been grateful to Nicol for "going out of his way to mentor him into the position."

"Everything that I've learned and everything that I've taken away from the Board of Directors and from Kirby will keep my plate full for the next year," said McConville, whose goal it is to run the Wharf to Wharf as efficiently as Nicol has.

"We don't want to see it stop because we all retire," Nicol said. "We all make a conservative effort to pass the baton for race leadership so it will be around 100 years from now."

Nicol's efforts over the last 40 years have developed the Wharf to Wharf from a small, humble jaunt of 273 runners into today's competitive footrace of 15,000 people. Nicol began as the finish line coordinator in 1973, a spot he's occupied for several years opposite official starter and Wharf to Wharf president Ken Thomas.

"He's been the driving force behind the race," said Thomas, a founding member of the board who previously held the



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Race Director Kirby Nicol gets some last minute logistics taken care of at the Wharf to Wharf office this week.

position of race director from 1973 to 1978. "He's got a passion for the race. I would say it's a healthy obsession. He's the kind of person who thinks about how the race can always be improving."

That's partly how he got the job in the first place. Nicol, who was a member of the board from 1974 to '83, presented ideas on how to increase the size of the event, add more features and bring in more corporate sponsors.

It wasn't too long ago when the Wharf to Wharf, which initially began as part of the Capitola Heritage Days, was so small organizers wouldn't even block off traffic for the runners. They would even knock on doors on Beach Street in order to set up the public address system, which would blare out of a window to the small group of runners awaiting start instructions.

"It was a much more low-key event," Thomas recalled.

But Nicol and Thomas traveled east in 1983 to attend a road race management conference, where they picked the collective brains of "all the big road races that were there." A year later, the race reached 6,000 entrants for the first time, while in Nicol's third year as race director, the event attracted 10,000 entrants.

Meanwhile, the Wharf to Wharf last year generated nearly \$242,000 in donations to local schools and athletic programs, a number that has continued to grow over the years.

"We were thinking our race could be significant and generate some money," Thomas said. "We realized it could be what it's become."

Thomas would like to see Nicol continue with the corporate sponsorship program in the future because he's done so well with it over the years. And the Capitola City Councilman and local realtor might just take him up on it.

After all, it was in 1987 when Nicol stepped down as race director after three years, thinking he might explore a different path.

The different path didn't take, though. Nicol was back as race director a year later in 1988.

"I missed the community part of it and the fulfillment of what we gave back to the youth programs and other programs," said Nicol, who then reflected back on how sports changed his life as a youth growing up in a small farming community in Illinois.

In a town where "nobody traveled" and few went to college, Nicol's life changed when he was introduced to athletics by his fifth-grade teacher. He played basketball, baseball and later attended the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, where he competed in the high jump. After serving as a high school track coach, Nicol volunteered with the Peace Corps and traveled to Asia and northern Africa on various coaching assignments.

He eventually ended up in the Philippines, where he coached the national track and field team at the Munich Olympics in 1972.

"Because I was introduced to athletics by my fifth-grade

teacher, it took me out of that environment, took me around the world. Everything changed," Nicol said. "If you can find an opportunity to provide to young people, it feels pretty good."

"With the Wharf to Wharf," he later added, "there's no controversy. Everybody knows what it is and everybody likes what it does. It's a feel-good kind of event. You don't like to give up that kind of stuff."

The scholarships, the award ceremonies, the wedding proposals, those who are running in memoriam and those who are recovering from illness, there are too many memories for Nicol to pick just one. He plans to continue helping out the Wharf to Wharf, but in the meantime, there may be some more traveling in his future.

And who knows, perhaps there is a memory of his own to be made at next year's Wharf to Wharf.

"It's an interesting possibility, to take a year off and maybe run the race next year," Nicol said. "See it from the pavement up."