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# Front Runners Help Indian Man Come Out, Run Half Marathon

*By Winnie McCroy*





**When Mukul Sharda left India for New York City a decade ago**, he was still in the closet and with work as his main focus, he didn't have huge circle of friends. But when the pandemic moved him toward introspection, he decided to come out as a gay man and live a more authentic life. Sharda joined the LGBTQ+ group Front Runners, and although he'd never been into athletics, ran his first-ever mile.

A year later, Sharda has loads of friends with whom he has done the Pride Run, among other events. Despite having relocated to Toronto for work, he will return to the Big Apple this weekend to realize his dream: running in the 2023 United Airlines NYC Half Marathon on March 19th. The 13.1-mile race goes right through Times Square, which holds a special place in Sharda's heart as the first place he saw people of all races, backgrounds, and sexual orientations come together to watch the ball drop on New Year's Eve when he arrived in the U.S.

Queerful joined Sharda as he rushed to get his travel documents together and keep up his training regimen for the half marathon. He had a lot to say about what it feels like to run for your life.

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**Winnie McCroy:** This is a real change from what your life used to look like. When you first move to New York City nine years ago, where were you coming from, and what was your situation there?

**Mukul Sharda:** I had come from India, and I was still in the closet. I was born and brought up in India, and I had a very happy childhood—except for the trauma that every gay child goes through. I was very confused about my identity, but work was my primary focus. I spent 10 years in New York ruminating on how things were and what I wanted to do in life. I kept on procrastinating whether to come out or not. But then Covid hit, and we were suddenly shut down in our homes. It was me in a small New York studio that used to overlook the Statue of Liberty. It was me in the city of my dreams, and a lot of demons started coming alive when the chaos of my everyday commute died down.

So, outside, it was post-apocalyptic—literally there was no one around. Everyone was shut down and it was like an end of the world kind of situation. I thought, “If this is what we are all looking at, why not live an authentic life?” Being truthful to myself [meant] more than anything else.

**WM:** So that was the start of your journey toward coming out?

**MS:** That started my coming-out journey. I tested the social experiment with two of my girlfriends and told them that I was gay, and they were pretty happy about it. In fact, *their kids* were pretty happy about it. One of them gave me a card. And then I spoke to some more friends and people at work. But back then I had no gay friends. A friend of mine, Zach, said I should try out Front Runners. They seemed to be a happy bunch. But I am a big man. All the runners that I see on their websites and the social media are like...

**WM:** Bone thin?

**MS:** The runners were all jacked and toned and doing triathlons and marathons. Look at me. I can't even go down the street without huffing and puffing. But I still managed to talk with this guy, Frank, who's like, “Even if you can't run, you can start walking with us.” So in early 2021, I started walking with them. They had a beginner's clinic, inducting new people into running and I was like, “This seems like a good idea. Let me join that.” And I met with this group of wonderful people who were all new to running, like me.

I think I was the biggest and the oldest in that group. But there was a lot of love that came through on the first day. One of the coaches, Michael Hall—a celebrated Instagram Influencer and a queer person—was my running buddy that day. He must have run half a mile with me when I started crying because my body was literally not used to running. And he's like, “Are you okay? Like I'm going through myriad emotions because my legs are giving up, I can't breathe, but more than anything else, I can't believe that this is something that I can do. And he's like, “Yes, you can do it.” And he kept on motivating me, talking me through, and by the end of it, I had to come out and tell him, “More than anything else, I don't think anyone has been so unconditionally nice and accepting the way you are being with me right now and that is the main emotion taking over my body and heart.”



**WM:** Well, then maybe it started to become more about finding friends than just about running?

**MS:** It's not even about finding friends. It's about finding yourself. It's about living in a way for the first time that you're not being shamed or taboo for who you are. You have to understand that, coming from a brown person of color who is raised and has brought up in a country where being gay was criminalized, where until recently, it was criminal to be gay, there was no credential that, "Oh, it's okay." Then once you come out, you go try to explore and you've got all these apps, which are also pretty toxic, right? Where is the safe space for queer kids and queer people where they're accepted because they're just being authentic and they're just being how God made them. Right?





So, finally I found these people who were just encouraging me for coming out. And then they're trying to make me run, something that I have never done. But it was all done in a beautiful way. And then I remember, [Michael] gave me a big hug, with his big giant burly shoulders, he gave me a big hug. I'm like, "Thank you so much, but this is something so new to me." So, I'm really a little jittery with all the emotions and then the following Saturday, the runs started becoming longer. I started crying a little bit more because of my back pain, but I also started making new friends. And then came the Pride Run, which was my first official race. And it was a salvation.

**WM:** That's a 5K, right? The Pride Run 5K.

**MS:** It's a little over 5K. It was my first official race and at the end of it there were more than 200 runners who were trying to cheer you on, making a rainbow tunnel, and to my surprise, all my straight friends and my cousins in the city, they had come out to cheer me on.

**WM:** Well, that's so wonderful.

**“It's about finding yourself. It's about living in a way for the first time you're not being shamed or taboo for who you are.”**

**MS:** And I was convinced that this is not the end. This is just the beginning. Before this, I had no gay friends and suddenly people are cheering for me. So, after the 5K I tried a 10k and then it was winter with vengeance, which I love being a big guy. It's easier for me to survive in winters than in summers. Everyone that I've ever seen has been this cool, slim runner. I don't see people of color and people of big size being the poster people for running, but I run as much as they do, and this is about inclusion of people of color. And people are encouraging body positivity. Finally, I went for my 10-mile run, and that was my last run in New York. At the end of the year,



I was surprised at the Front Runners Gala when they gave me the Newcomer of the Year award.

**WM:** Oh wow, that must have been really something. How did you react?

**MS:** It was a surprise. I'll tell you exactly what I told them: "Back then, when I came out the year prior to my immediate friends and family, I had no gay friends. I'm a statistician and a consultant, so I'm extremely methodical in my approach. I made a resolution that by the next year, I would have five gay friends; that's gonna be the objective of the year. And by the end of the year at the gala I had more than 200 people on my phone, none of whom had met on those clandestine apps. People who I had met during runs. And I had a family—an extended family of my choice. And what brings us all together in Front Runners versus other clubs, is—it's not only about pride, right? It's also about the passion for the sport. Making non-runners runners is a big transformation, just like making people who have been shamed be proud of who they are is a big transformation. It's the pride but it's also the pain that all of us have endured. There is a recognition of empathy, sympathy, and acknowledgment that we are all in this together and that it gets better.





**WM:** That's got to be a really powerful font to draw from when you're feeling low, to know that you have this team with you to see you through and to make that rainbow tunnel when you get to the end.

**MS:** Yes and that is the pride that we all have to earn. I wish that none of the queer kids even have to come out in the future, like hundred years from now, and they're nurtured and given the same love and affection that the straight kids are, and we don't lose out on emotions of love for the teens and the 20s. The love that straight kids celebrate, you know, those first moments of love and romance. They don't even know whom to talk to it about. I wish in the future, no one has to do that. And at the same time, I'm talking about the many lost years of not being able to enjoy running because I was big and everyone would doubt me, and I would doubt myself. So Front Runners made something possible, which I never thought would be possible.

**WM:** And now, you've gotten to this point where you've been training for the UANyc Half Marathon. When you finished your 10-mile run, did you feel okay? Because that's just about halfway to a marathon.

**MS:** My dream is to do a triathlon in a few years. So, I have four half-marathons planned for the summer. I've got to try.

**WM:** Wow!

**MS:** I'm currently in Toronto for work. I'm awaiting my U.S. [travel documents] and keeping my fingers crossed that I get them before the United Half. I also have the Brooklyn Half, which is coming in May, then I have the Toronto Half and then the Chicago Half. I'm waiting for these runs. And the objective is next year, I do the marathon. And then the year after, I do the Staten Island Half, and try the Staten Island Triathlon.

**WM:** And when you're training for this marathon, what sort of things are you doing? Are you running 10 miles every weekend, or do you have a cross-training regimen? What's your program for getting ready?

**MS:** Fortunately, Front Runners is a global organization. I've run with them in San Francisco, in Chicago, in London, and here in Toronto. So, the Toronto group is pretty active. I try to run with them once a week and I run on my own two times a week. There's a structured program and I'm following the app, which is facilitated by New York Road Runners to help you train. So that and swimming. I'm like a hippopotamus in water. I'm happy there.

**WM:** It sounds like you're doing everything that you need to get yourself ready for this race. As this race approaches, what is going through your mind right now? I know you spoke about the hope to get your visa; are there other things that you're thinking?



*Mukul Sharda at the Front Runners Gala*

**MS:** That's the main thing, and it's just a matter of time, because there's a big backlog. The United Half and the Brooklyn Half are two of the most celebrated races



in the five boroughs. So, I wanted to nail both of them. And more importantly as an immigrant growing up, I always wanted to be in New York. I was able to achieve that thanks to my work, but then the other thing was being able to run through all the boroughs, being able to run along with so many other people through Times Square. You don't get to do that in any other race. So that's a big one, and I think this would be a qualifier for next year's marathon.

**WM:** Oh, you know, it is. My wife is a runner, and that race is definitely one of the qualifiers. So, you're going to go run with your friends, fingers crossed.

**MS:** Yes.

**WM:** And what are you guys going to do right after the race? Do you have plans to celebrate?

**MS:** I think it's going to be me catching up with a lot of my friends because I have been out of New York for many months. And a trip to Magnolia, of course.

**“Making non-runners runners is a big transformation, just like making people who have been shamed be proud of who they are is a big transformation.”**

**WM:** Yes, head to Magnolia Bakery, and get that cupcake carbo loading! Good luck!

**MS:** Yes, I need to do that and I plan to go on a trip after that, visiting my friends in the Tri-State area. So that's a plan.

**WM:** Fantastic. And I wanted to ask since you spoke to this—the fact that you are do not embody the typical runner and now you put yourself out there and you're being this role model for other people who maybe also don't think that they are thin enough or fast enough or whatever enough to be a runner: What message would you share to other folks who are maybe in your similar situation to encourage them to go for their dreams?

**MS:** Have the faith, right? If you can see it in your head, you can do it. Your current circumstances are not who you are. But what's in your head is what you're capable of so don't give up on yourself. What I would say is that running is meditative, running can absolve you from all the anxieties and worries. You can be a runner at any age, and you'll make so many new friends. This is a community that I've been a part of for more than two years. Now, I tell every queer person that I come across to try it out—you will literally discover so many things you are capable of that you can't even conceive of right now through self-love and running.



*Mukul Sharda runs, out and proud*

**WM:** Powerful! I know we just met but I'm a hundred percent rooting for you. I'm showing up for you there and I really hope that you make it to and through the race. I'm very proud of you.

**MS:** I'll keep my fingers crossed. I'm also, rooting for everyone doing the Brooklyn Half. There's a big Front Runners community there, so I'm hoping to see them in more races in the future.

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