

# The Washington Post

## First Person Singular: American Odyssey Relay race director Bob Fleshner



Name: Bob Fleshner

Occupation: Race director, American Odyssey Relay

Age: 55 | Home: Bethesda (Benjamin C. Tankersley)

Sunday, April 4, 2010

I didn't start running until I was 24. I was in my second year of law school, had just finished a two-pound bag of M&M's and was disgusted with myself. Just ran out the door and started running down Columbia Pike. Two weeks later, I ran my first race, and that was it. I'd run cross-country in high school and hated it. I guess it was just my time to run.

In 2005, I came home to my wife and said, "I'm going to stop being a health-care executive and become a personal trainer, [race director](#) and cross-country coach." She said, "You'll really like that." I'm very lucky. I tell her all the time she's the only thing I don't get bored of.

We all crave being a part of something. Relay races give runners a chance to be part of a team, to share that camaraderie. And regular people who sit cooped up in an office get a chance to do this big, crazy thing. You go into work and say: "I just ran a 200-mile relay race! I didn't shower! I didn't check my e-mail or call my wife." Runners will e-mail me and say, "We're going to have a blast." And I say to myself: "No, you are going to have a blast. I am going to be eating in my car and making sure no one gets lost."

The amount of meticulous detail involved in [a multi-state relay race](#) is nothing like your average 10K. Everyone runs three times, and everyone -- and here's where it gets interesting -- has to run at night,

with a headlamp and cellphone. Runner safety is No. 1, but runner comfort is a very close second. We did not have enough porta-potties the last year. Friends from my former life like to point out that I'm now the guy in charge of toilet logistics. But these decisions, my decisions, matter. When I was in-house counsel with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, I was so jealous of the business guys; they were having all the fun. I was just the scribe. As CEO of United Healthcare Mid-Atlantic, I could make a decision I knew in my heart was right, but nothing could happen until the home office signed off on it. But if all the runners are home safe in their beds the night after the race, it is my success. If someone gets lost or can't find a bathroom, it's my fault.

A friend from United calls me every so often and asks the same two questions: "Are you wearing pants with a belt?" No. "Have you shaven today?" No. I can't wait until he's free, too.

**Interview By Amanda Long**