

March 11, 2002

Endurance of champions Greek native follows ancestors' footsteps

By **ROB BORKOWSKI CRIER STAFF WRITER**

WOODVILLE — Anna Gammal basks in the knowledge that when she takes her first steps in the 2002 Boston Marathon she will follow in her ancestors' footsteps.

Gammal, a native of Greece can trace her ancestry to the 1946 Marathon Champion Stylianos Kyriakides and the ancient Greek warrior, Pheidippides, whose run from Marathon to Athens to bring word of victory over the Persians, inspired the first Olympic Marathon in 1896.

The Rosewood Lane resident has already gathered many laurels: she owns a business, Body and Beyond massage therapy, is the 1988 Greek 10K champion, is bilingual, and is an aerobics instructor who won second place in the New England Regional Aerobics Competition.

But she's not resting on her laurels.

" 'Live your life like you're going to die tomorrow and learn like you'll never die,' " Gammal said, quoting a saying from her country.

In that spirit, Gammal began training for the Boston Marathon this summer, even though she'd yet to secure a number for the event.

She and her husband, Joseph, moved to Hopkinton in 1994.

The two met in Greece in 1989 during an aerobics class Gammal was teaching at a hotel, where Joseph, an American, was staying.

" When my husband came and he took my class, I thought he was very handsome, " Gammal said.

Gammal, who was an ardent gymnast and runner, was in the habit of leaving immediately after work to train and rest for the following day, but her boss ran into her later that week and invited her to a party at the hotel.

A toga party, as it happened, which Joseph also attended.

" He was the only one there who didn't wear a toga. And I was very impressed, because there was a smart guy, " Gammal said. The two danced and talked as well as the language barrier between them would permit.

He proposed. She accepted.

" I went home and I said to my brother, 'Tonight I met the man I'm going to marry,' " she said.

Joseph returned to school in Barcelona where he was participating in an exchange program through Dartmouth College, and Gammal spent several months studying English, a subject she had shown no interest in until she met Joseph. Because students are taught foreign languages at an early age in Greece, Gammal found herself learning alongside 6- and 8-year-olds.

Gammal said she and Joseph spoke to each other perhaps a month and a half during the next three years, and finally, in 1992, he called to tell her he was returning to Greece to bring her to the United States.

" He's like, 'Do you understand?' " and I said, " Yes, I understand' " .

The two had just enjoyed their first complete discussion in English.

As the only woman in the family to marry an outsider and leave the country, Gammal did not have a lot of support from her parents. In fact her mother, she said, told her she would rather bury her than see her go.

" They couldn't understand that it was my destiny. That's how I felt, " she said, so, " I just followed my instincts, my love and my heart, " Gammal said.

She and Joseph were married by a justice of the peace in the United States in 1992 and then returned to Greece in 1993 for a traditional Greek wedding. The family has since learned to accept Gammal's decision.

" Everybody's fine now, " Gammal said.

The couple lived in California for a little while before moving to Worcester in 1993, and although she was still an athlete at heart, the changes in her life occupied too much time for her to keep jogging.

" I totally stopped running, " she said.

In California Gammal started volunteering at a local day care center, and did the same for the local YMCA in Worcester.

" I love kids. I absolutely love kids, " she said, remembering how they helped her polish her English. " They don't care if they embarrass you or not, " Gammal said.

Whenever she mispronounced something, the children quickly corrected her, she said.

The YMCA offered to send her to college classes to become an assistant teacher, and she jumped at the opportunity, earning an A in the course.

" Here I know no English and I'm learning psychology of children, " Gammal marveled.

She worked at the YMCA for five years, eventually teaching gymnastics, too.

During that time she also earned her certification as an aerobics instructor and began competing in local competitions, winning second place in the 1995 New England singles competition. A torn Achilles tendon cost her a shot at the championship.

By 1994 the couple had moved to Hopkinton, and Gammal quickly realized she was living in the town where the Boston Marathon started. She told Joseph, " One day I'm going to run the Marathon. "

In the years since, Gammal has established her massage therapy business and watched the start of the Marathon where Ash Street meets Main Street in front of Town Common.

" I get so emotional when I hear the gun go off, " Gammal said.

When she did begin running again in 1997, she discovered she was pregnant.

Running was on hold again, but Gammal's philosophy launched her back into a new challenge: massage therapy.

On the suggestion of a friend, Gammal used massage to soothe sore muscles, and was instantly hooked. But she wanted to give as well as receive.

" Perhaps this is something I'd like to learn, " she said to herself.

After an argument with the president of admissions about whether she could handle the challenge of simultaneously learning English, anatomy and psychology, she attended the Bancroft School of massage.

Having to first learn the English anatomy and psychology terms in her text books added hours of study time.

" I never have studied in my life so hard, " Gammal said.

She graduated May 5, 1998 and gave birth to Nicholas on May 26. Now, completely at home in Hopkinton and with her son, Nicholas, approaching the age of 5, Gammal has begun to focus on the Marathon.

With so many of her clients at her business, Body and Beyond, on Main Street, now dedicated Marathoners, Gammal's fire for running has begun to burn again.

But she has more goals laid out for herself. She wants to see the Olympic games in Greece, be part of a team of massage therapists for Olympic athletes and qualify as a runner so she can compete on the Greek Olympic team in 2004.

One thing many don't know about Pheidippides's legendary and fatal run, Gammal said: the day before that run, the professional messenger had also been dispatched to ask for aid from Sparta, 160 miles away. He returned from the mission in time to fight alongside his countrymen against the Persians. After their victory, he volunteered to run to Athens.

" And he was running on sandals, " Gammal said.

While her physical endurance has yet to be tested to that degree, her spiritual endurance seems to be measuring up.