

# Hurdles, not of wood, for Cherokee runner

Malia Lyles has not been able to take for granted many of the things that her classmates do.

By Josh Egerman  
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

Jenna Viggiano didn't know the right words.

She didn't know how to talk about one of her best friends and teammates.

She knows that Malia Lyles is different from most of their classmates at Cherokee High, but she didn't feel comfortable talking about it. She felt awkward discussing how the team has become part of Lyles' support network.

Then she found the words. "She's so talented," said Viggiano, a senior captain on Cherokee's cross-country team. "I don't think it's fair she has to think about all this other stuff."

The other stuff is what sets Lyles apart. Well, that and her growing talent on a cross-country course.

Lyles, who had the seventh-fastest time of any South Jersey girl at the mammoth Shore Coaches Invitational on Oct. 5, is the daughter of a single mother working two jobs trying to make ends meet.

She spent the first 12 years of her life being raised by her grandparents in Marlton until her grandmother passed away, her grandfather moved to Virginia, and her mother returned from Chicago with Malia's sister, 10 years her junior.

In some places, her story would not be unique. In affluent Marlton, Lyles' background sets her apart.

She knows it. She just tries not to see it that way.

"Since I didn't grow up with my mom, I thought [living with my grandparents] was normal just like everybody else," said Lyles, who said she still talks to her father. "But in some ways, I think I got a better upbringing than some people that were brought up by their parents."

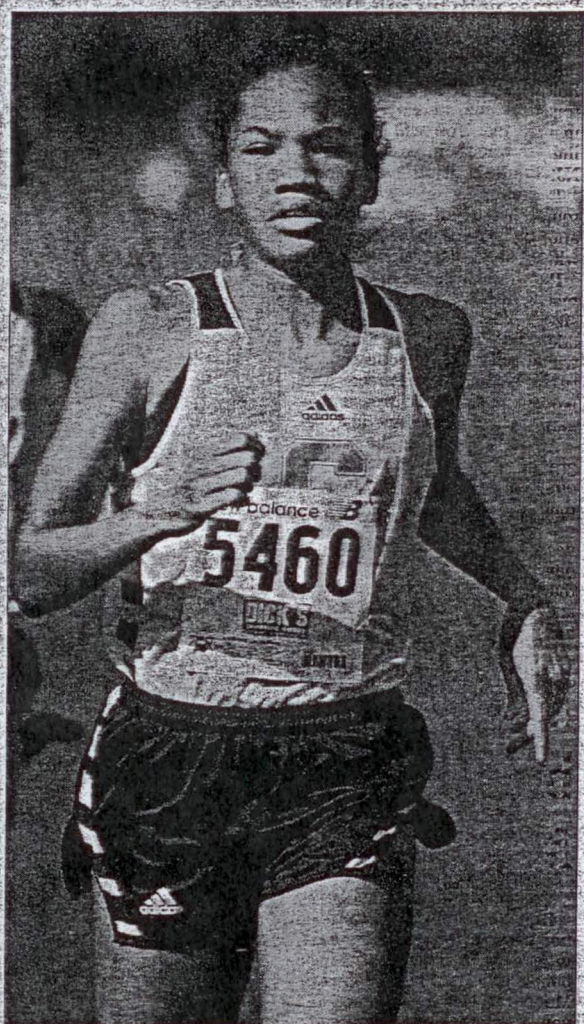
"And [her grandparents] really encouraged me to do stuff, like running and soccer."

Her life changed, though, when her mother, Carol Lewis, came back from the Midwest. Also, as she got older, she realized she didn't have the same comforts as her friends.

The adjustment, she said, to living with her mother, was not easy.

The realization that she had to grow up quickly to help care for her sister, Alondra Lewis, was tough to accept. At times, it still is.

When it's rough, she lets her mother know. Then she realizes how hard her mother, a legal secretary during the day who works as a manager at a bowling alley three nights a week, is working so the family can stay in Marlton.



Malia Lyles of Cherokee posted the seventh-fastest time of any South Jersey girl at the Shore Coaches Invitational meet Oct. 5.

"A lot of times I'll tell her [how frustrated I am], and she'll say 'You know I'm doing this for you and trying to help you guys out so you can still live here,'" Lyles said. "I don't want to leave here because I have so many friends. It would crush me."

Her friends are there to help. They would never do anything to make her feel different, she said, and they would never hesitate to lend a hand.

Her coach, Chris Tarello, digs into his own pocket to buy her training shoes. Viggiano, who lives in her neighborhood, is always giving her a ride somewhere. Her teammates used money they raised wrapping gifts at Zany Brainy, money that was originally earmarked to pay for a team trip to Florida, to help pay for Lyles to go to running camp this summer.

"It makes me feel good that they care enough about me," Lyles said. "It makes me feel really good that there's people besides my family who are looking out for me."

Accepting assistance isn't always easy. But, she said, pride can't get in the way.

ROSE HOWERTER / Inquirer Suburban Staff

"She handles it with dignity," Tarello said.

The support she gets has helped her become a better person, a better team leader, and a better runner. Lyles, who didn't run cross-country her first two years at Cherokee, needs to be better than the rest.

Since having some success in track as a freshman, she's seen running as her ticket to a college scholarship.

If she keeps running like she did at Shore Coaches, she should get that ticket punched.

"A lot of the other girls run for the social aspects or purely for athletic competition," Tarello said. "As opposed to Malia, who does it for those reasons, but also, when she's out there hurting on the course, she's the only thing she has to keep in mind that the others don't is that her future rides on this."

Her present thanks to her friends, coaches and teammates is going well. The future, she said, will take care of itself.

Contact Josh Egerman at 856-779-3865 or jegerman@phillynews.com.