

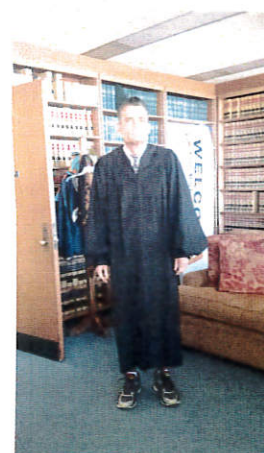
# Judge Gives Homeless, Addicts a Second Chance Through Running

The Midnight Mission Running Club on Skid Row gives recovering addicts a new identity.

By [Liam Boylan-Pett \(/person/liam-boylan-pett\)](#) MONDAY, MAY 4, 2015, 9:28 AM



Judge Craig Mitchell (center) runs through downtown L.A. with the Midnight Mission's running club. (Photo courtesy of Skid Row Marathon.)



Three times a week, 10 to 15 runners meet at 5:45 a.m. for a five- to six-mile run through downtown Los Angeles. The route doesn't wind through the picturesque Hollywood Hills or the palm tree-lined streets of Beverly Hills. Instead, it starts and ends in Skid Row, an area crowded with cardboard boxes and makeshift tents that houses 8,000 to 11,000 of the city's homeless population.

This is the meeting spot because most of the runners in this group call Skid Row—a roughly 50-block area in the heart of Los Angeles—home. These recovering addicts and homeless found the group after enrolling at the Midnight Mission shelter and addiction center in Skid Row.

Not all of the runners in the Midnight Mission Running Club are in rehab, though. One of them is Craig Mitchell, a 58-year-old with black hair that's graying at the temples. Mitchell is a superior court judge, working on felony trials in LA's criminal courts, and he's the one who brought running to the Midnight Mission. To all the runners, he's "The Judge."

Judge Mitchell, who is married with three grown children, started the running club in 2012. It all began when a young man he had previously sentenced to prison, Roderick Brown, contacted him through the Midnight Mission. "For some reason he decided he liked the way I treated him, even though I sent him to prison," Mitchell says. "He looked me up and introduced me to the mission."

As soon as Mitchell got there, he decided the best way to reach the people was through running. "There are so many little things that emanate from this very basic idea of just running," he says.

Mitchell had been running for about 15 years when he started the club. He ran his first race because he was asked by his boss at the District Attorney's Office to run a relay. It was too early in his career to say no, so he joined the team. It was a blessing—he's a runner to the core now, even when he's in the courtroom.

Under the black robe he wears on the bench, Mitchell is in a shirt and tie as you'd expect. But below the belt he's in just his running shorts and shoes—he likes to change out of his robe quickly to maximize the time of his lunchtime run.

Judge Craig Mitchell wears running shoes under his work attire. (Photo courtesy of Judge Mitchell.)

At the Midnight Mission, the running club had humble beginnings. Early on, if one or two runners met for a jog, Mitchell considered it a good day.

Ryan Navales was one of first to show up consistently. In the 1990s, Navales had a family, a home, and a job. But alcoholism and drug use took it all away—including his relationship with his daughter. He was homeless when a family member got him into Midnight Mission in the late 2000s. He immediately began the mission's 12-step approach to treatment and reintegration into the community.

Navales, 45, saw Mitchell's Midnight Mission Running Club as something else to do in his rehab. "It started as a lark for me," he says. "I was never really a runner."

But he turned into one. "Running gave me a positive self-image and a new identity," he says. Plus, it allowed him to travel the world.

The club grew in size and scope. Not only were they meeting for runs, they were running races, including the 2013 L.A. Marathon.

In September 2013, the Midnight Mission sent Mitchell and three of his runners to Ghana for a marathon. That trip was such a success that in March they sent a group of about 20 runners—10 of whom were part of the mission's running club—to run the Rome Marathon.

"We just *did* Rome," Navales says. "Running the marathon, finishing on the cobblestones near the Coliseum, it was just awe for me. The gravity of that still hasn't hit me."

The travel is just another component to addiction recovery and the Midnight Mission's goal of self-sufficiency. Their next trip is already in the works as they're planning to run the Da Nang International Marathon in Vietnam.

"We take lives that have been very narrowly defined [by drug addiction, homelessness, or crime], and we allow them to see the larger world and their relationship to it," Mitchell says. "It isn't this 10-block area of Skid Row where all you see is plight and hypodermic needles and homelessness. You have to rethink your relationship to the larger world."

Running does that, too. "The glorious thing about group running," Mitchell says, "is that you pair up with somebody different every time." It equalizes everyone in the group once they're out on the road.

It's true for Navales. After years of his loved ones no longer trusting him, he never thought he'd have a relationship like the one he has with Mitchell. "The Judge is one of my best friends," Navales says. "He's an intimidating man, but you start running with him and he's clowning and joking and elbow rubbing. He's one of the guys."

Navales has been sober for five years now, and he works for the Midnight Mission as the manager of government and public affairs. He has his own place outside Skid Row and has a positive relationship with his daughter again.

It's just one of the success stories of Mitchell's running club. Throughout it all, a documentary film crew has been capturing the running club for *Skid Row Marathon* (1). They've also been a part of the runners' lives, capturing stories like Navales' or Rebecca Hayes', who was homeless as a result of drug and alcohol problems as well.

The documentary is a bonus for Mitchell. As a felony judge, he oversees some of the most serious criminal cases—murder, rape, sexual assault. He sees the worst in humans on a daily basis.

But the running club allows him to maintain a balanced sense of humanity.

"When I don't have my dang black robe," he says, "I've got my running shorts on and we all look the same."

That's why Mitchell will continue to grow the Midnight Mission Running Club.

He doesn't know where it will go from here. But he does know that the numbers are increasing, they group will continue to travel, and the club members will continue to support each other in a positive way.

Running Connections (2)