

# Long COVID stopped Cheshire marathoner in his tracks, but he's running again

Ed Stannard  
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Southern Connecticut State University Math Professor Len Brin runs up the steps on the bleachers at SCSU's Jess Dow Field in New Haven on June 21, 2022.

CHESHIRE — Len Brin has run four marathons and was hoping to qualify for Boston when COVID-19 hit him the day after Thanksgiving 2020.

Then, in January, it hit him again, hard, and didn't let up.

“My heart and my lungs were reacting more than I was used to,” he said.

He thought he was over-exercising, but his heart palpitations went on for months. His breathing was heavy, he had so much fluid in his throat he couldn't sleep, and he suffered from brain fog — an inability to concentrate. He also had a month-long headache.

“It was rough,” he said.

Almost a year and a half after Brin, 52, a math professor at Southern Connecticut State University, realized he had long-haul COVID, he will run in the Gaylord Gauntlet on Saturday, a 5K run through the woods and on open trails that includes 23 obstacles, such as monkey bars, crawling through the mud and a rock wall.

Brin described his recovery from long COVID as a series of improvements, feeling better each time.

When Brin first got the disease, “I just started with the chills that night and then I had the fever and aches and I was pretty well exhausted that weekend,” he said Tuesday.

But his recovery leaped the final hurdle May 30.

“As of that day, I finally feel like I'm living rather than just surviving,” he said.

“I'm going to recondition myself and that's the last test.”

Brin, who is fully vaccinated, got COVID before there were any vaccines or treatments. No one knew what to do for him. He went to a pulmonologist and a cardiologist, who put him on an exercise routine.

“For me, a lot of the strain was mental,” he said. “Nobody could give me any answer. The mental strain of not knowing what to do and what I was going to do was terrible.”

He went to the Yale COVID Recovery Center and finally to the Gaylord COVID Support Group at Gaylord Hospital in Wallingford.

“Being able to talk to people who could relate was huge for me,” Brin said.

He said those who have long COVID should have patience.

“If you’re really in it for the long haul, it’s not going to be a month; it’s not going to be three months; it’s not going to be six months,” he said.

For Brin, the exercise program helped lift his mental burden. He grew to appreciate the daily sense of, “this is what I’m able to do to help myself today,” he said. “It was big.”

Jim Russo, who runs the Gaylord group, said Brin was “still struggling quite a bit” when he first came to the group.

“I would say our group really helped him continue to find ... his own solutions,” Russo said. “It’s not the same thing for everybody. He is an athlete.”

Russo added, “Watching Len now, it was a pretty amazing journey, and he should be pretty proud of himself.”

The group, which started in July 2020 for hospital inpatients, “then blossomed into a support group for those who have left our care,” Russo said.

It is open to anyone in the community with COVID or long COVID, and their family members, Russo said.

He said there are members who have been with the group since the beginning, “and they still have PTSD,” he said. “They went from having a normal life to being intubated, ventilated and in a coma pretty quickly.”

Russo said the average person probably doesn’t understand long-haul COVID.

“Aren’t you better now? That’s the biggest question they get asked and the answer is no,” he said.

But the for the group members, “there’s a lot of emotions involved, and when we hear these stories, you can hear the emotions in their voice.”

Brin took the spring 2021 semester off from teaching, and returning to teach four classes in the fall was a major challenge, he said.

“When classes did start, I was scheduled to teach in person, so I tried,” he said. “It was very nerve-wracking and I was anxious about being in a crowd of people.”

Wearing a mask didn’t help, he said.

“I could not imagine going through that level of mental and physical stress on a daily basis,” he said. “It wasn’t going to happen.”

He asked that his classes, which were already hybrid, be put online.

Just planning his lessons exhausted him, Brin said.

“In my 22 years I’ve never had to cancel a class for lack of ability to put together a lesson plan,” he said. But he had to do that four or five times.

Brin’s wife, Amy, said it was hard to watch her husband, who had built their patio and installed hardwood floors in the house, be unable to do simple chores.

But now, she gets to share in his triumph of recovery.

From my perspective, he seems almost back to normal,” she said.

*edward.stannard@hearstmediact.com*