

CRIME & PUBLIC SAFETY

Gainesville teenager honors fallen first responders 1 mile at a time

'I just feel honored and humbled to be there,' 14-year-old runner says



Credit: Richard Collinson

Andrew Collinson, 14, has run more than 45 miles in honor of fallen first responders since 2022.

By David Aaro - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution,

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On a frigid Wednesday in January, 14-year-old Andrew Collinson felt a sense of pride as he gripped the flag tightly with his right hand. His breath was visible during each stride of the mile run he has completed often since 2022 in support of fallen first responders.

As he waved the official police flag and a line of patrol vehicles behind him illuminated the night sky, Collinson tried his best to hold back the emotions. On this evening near his Gainesville home, he was running in honor of Coweta County sheriff's Deputy Eric Minix, who was fatally struck by an Alabama police officer's vehicle while stepping out of his own after a chase Jan. 4.

"I don't show (emotion) like on my face," Collinson told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "I just tell myself I'm doing it for the first responder and that's all the motivation I need."

Credit: Running 4 Heroes Inc.

Collinson is one of five youth runners for the Florida-based nonprofit organization Running 4 Heroes Inc., which raises awareness and funds for responders who have died in the line of duty, including police officers,

firefighters and K-9s. It was the 45th time the Gainesville Middle School student has put his sneakers to pavement.

On Feb. 2, the eighth grader [traveled to Spalding County](#) to run for Sgt. Marc “Mac” McIntyre, [who was killed Dec. 29](#) while responding to a request for a wellness check just outside of Griffin. Following that run, he presented the flag to the family as law enforcement looked on, wearing a mix of solemn and appreciative expressions.

Credit: Running 4 Heroes Inc.

Then on Tuesday, the teenager ran a mile for fallen [Georgia State Patrol Trooper Jimmy Cenescar](#), who died in a crash last month while attempting a traffic stop on I-85 in Gwinnett County. This time, Collinson was closely followed by cadets from the 117th Trooper school [during the run](#) at the Georgia Public Safety Training Center in Forsyth.

[https://www.facebook.com/gadepartmentofpublicsafety/posts/pfbid0b3Am2mXmDPg3sDR1XguW66i3hprek389whUiAac2WMPN84pJAktw4hRRatnHixU5I?_cft__\[0\]=AZUKjET7Rbpg2jta7wqFOWADjBxl5Kg4oibezahf0GPSowBlxl4TCyxpelsM4cRCgxLdLvPCRIiNCWp_kcdZljfijh5DIYUI-EEeVypwsRcQyxc0rw3HV2X5ILF2tOtRftT-wq6eKfjkrRisZEosciZ-MPTTHohCdFRZ_6bSB-LSjrIX1ulfWvb_L0U3G9Uf2POY&_tn=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/gadepartmentofpublicsafety/posts/pfbid0b3Am2mXmDPg3sDR1XguW66i3hprek389whUiAac2WMPN84pJAktw4hRRatnHixU5I?_cft__[0]=AZUKjET7Rbpg2jta7wqFOWADjBxl5Kg4oibezahf0GPSowBlxl4TCyxpelsM4cRCgxLdLvPCRIiNCWp_kcdZljfijh5DIYUI-EEeVypwsRcQyxc0rw3HV2X5ILF2tOtRftT-wq6eKfjkrRisZEosciZ-MPTTHohCdFRZ_6bSB-LSjrIX1ulfWvb_L0U3G9Uf2POY&_tn=%2CO%2CP-R)

Collinson’s runs, inspired by his family, have contributed to the more than 1,600 miles the organization has logged in honor of fallen first responders since 2019. A mile is run for each lost in the line of duty across the U.S. No run is missed, according to its CEO Chad Cartledge, the father of teenager Zechariah Cartledge, who founded the nonprofit in 2019.

This year, 11 officers have died in the line of duty, [according to the Officer Down Memorial Page](#). Of those, three were from Georgia.

Chad Cartledge said each mile will usually take place in the area where the youth runners live. He said he tracks the memorial page to know when an officer dies and then determines which runner is the best fit. The law enforcement agency is then contacted.

“Anytime there is a Georgia fallen hero, we always try to have Andrew do it since he’s in Georgia,” Cartledge told the AJC, pointing out there are also youth runners in Nevada, New Jersey and Florida.

After the run, the flag is sent to the family and/or agency of the fallen hero along with a handwritten note from the runner. The organization will sometimes use donated funds to send the runners to where the responder’s surviving family lives, or on rare occasions, the family and law enforcement agency will travel to the runner’s location, which was the case in Gainesville on Jan. 10.

About an hour before embarking on his run that evening in near-freezing temperatures, Collinson, as he always does, practiced what he would say to honor Minix. He said he imagines he is speaking directly with the first responder’s family.

“I’m thinking to myself, about the person I’m running for, the family, department and I’m always in my head,” Collinson said. “I’m giving thanks, talking about how he/she did this. How they did so much good on this Earth.”

After the mile run, his face still red from the cold, Collinson didn’t have to imagine anymore. He walked over to [Minix’s wife and one of his three young daughters nearby](#) and gave them a special Running 4 Heroes coin, a

handwritten letter and the flag, which he had folded quickly through months of practice. They both broke down in tears, the teen said.

In attendance were also members of the Coweta sheriff's office, Georgia State Patrol and local responders. Coweta Sgt. Toby Nix said he's grateful for what Collinson does.

"To know that this horribly sad moment for our community and agency reached people far and wide is a testament to our friend Eric," Nix told the AJC.

Credit: Running 4 Heroes Inc.

Collinson's appreciation for first responders started at home. His grandfather, Richard Collinson, served as a volunteer EMS chief in New Jersey for about 30 years. On 9/11, the 64-year-old helped set up a hospital in the parking lot of then-Giants Stadium and traveled to Ground Zero the next day. However, like many other first responders who went to that area of Manhattan, he was diagnosed with cancer and suffered from PTSD.

Two years ago, the elder Collinson approached his grandson, who was watching TV at their home, and let him know about the opportunity to try out for Running 4 Heroes. Without hesitation, Andrew said yes, inspired by those who risk their lives every day for others, he said.

But joining wasn't exactly easy.

Collinson had to finish eight miles of recorded, yet unofficial "tryout" runs before a committee that oversees the runners determined he was ready. Cartledge said there were times when a potential runner wasn't accepted because the organization felt their parents signed them up just to make them famous — videos of the official runs are posted to the [nonprofit's Facebook page](#) with more than 380,000 followers. That wasn't the case for Collinson and his family, who showed true sincerity, Cartledge said.

"You can tell pretty quickly if kids are doing it because they're having fun or if kids are doing it because they understand," he said.

But despite his clear passion, running for fallen first responders isn't a forever gig for the 14-year-old. He will be forced to stop at the end of the year he turns 16 — a time determined by the organization so runners can start preparing for their careers, Cartledge said.

Until that happens, Collinson said every step and worn sole is a privilege.

"I remember when I was younger, I always thought that I would just be in my room playing dumb video games," he said. "But no, I'm over here doing these amazing runs. I just feel honored and humbled to be there."