

## WELLNESS CHAMPION

## MARILU ROMO

COMPREHENSIVE NURSE

## HEALTH &amp; HUMAN SERVICES

**M**arilu Romo starts most weekday evenings the same way — by lacing up her running shoes and heading straight to the trails after work. The 43-year-old comprehensive nurse for Hidalgo County Health and Human Services has built her daily rhythm around movement, resilience, and discipline, carving out time for herself between patient care, motherhood, and long-distance training. But her commitment to a healthy lifestyle wasn't born from simple interest. It was shaped by hardship, fear, and the determination to reclaim her body after a devastating car accident that once made even walking feel impossible.

Romo describes her younger years as reasonably active — she danced in high school — but she did not grow up in a home where fitness or athletics were encouraged. Her real relationship with exercise began later, in her 30s, after a physical therapist suggested she return to the gym as part of her emotional and physical recovery. She had been injured in a crash in 2014 that left her with a dislocated hip and pain severe enough to alter nearly every part of her daily routine. For months following the accident, she slept on a wooden board in an uncomfortable position.

“I was scared of trying anything,” she recalled. Returning to movement was intimidating, especially because the exercises she once enjoyed felt out of reach. She spent months in pain, unsure whether she would ever regain her strength or confidence. The hip injury required extensive therapy but no surgery. Still, the process showed her how easily something as fundamental as walking could disappear.



***“I know how it feels to not be able to walk... now that I can, I’m just grateful.”***

“I got tired of being in pain,” she said. Eventually, she turned away from online advice and sought support from a close friend — an experienced runner who had completed dozens of marathons and understood the patience the sport demands. He became her coach, and in the year that followed, Romo saw changes she once thought were out of reach.

She committed to consistency, traded sugar and processed carbs for an anti-inflammatory approach tailored to her needs, and embraced a form of intermittent fasting. The nutritional changes were difficult — especially during the holidays and special occasions — but the results spoke louder than the cravings. Within a year, she lost 20 pounds, but more importantly, she

20 pounds, but more importantly, she lost the pain that had lingered for years. The improvement was so dramatic that she was able to complete the McAllen Half Marathon and later trained for three additional half marathons — hitting a personal record in each one — something she once believed would never again be possible.

That progress came with more than physical benefits. The return to movement restored her mindset.

Romo now runs four days a week, typically in the afternoons after her shift, saving longer runs of 10 to 12 miles on Sundays. Her pace has strengthened significantly; once a 12-to-

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13-minute per mile runner, she now comfortably runs in the 8-minute range. Her routine is unwavering, guided by structure and the discipline she learned from her coach.

The motivation behind her lifestyle goes beyond personal achievement. Working in health care for more than a decade has shown her firsthand what it means when the body loses its ability to move. She spent years caring for patients who were fully aware mentally but unable to walk or independently manage their daily needs. Those experiences left a lasting mark.

She carries those individuals with her on the trail — those who cannot run or walk, those who once could but no longer do, and those whose bodies changed in ways they could not control. Romo says that memory keeps her grounded and grateful, fueling her

commitment to move while she still can.

Her family also inspires her. As a mother of two — one young adult and still in school — she takes pride in being an example to her children. Her upcoming role as a first-time grandmother motivates her to stay strong, mobile, and active for as long as possible. She imagines running with her granddaughter someday, the same way she now encourages relatives and coworkers to join her on the trail.

At the clinic, colleagues often approach her with questions about training, nutrition, or general wellness. Those who see her achievements often ask about how she started. She offers advice grounded in realism, telling people that meaningful change begins with food choices and consistency, not shortcuts.

Romo works hard for her goals and protects the structure of her training, but she still makes room for others who want to join her on the trail. When coworkers or friends ask to run with her — especially if they're at a different pace — she plans those sessions on her days off or during lighter training windows. She never skips her own workouts, but she adjusts when she can, making space for others while staying committed to the discipline that keeps her healthy.

Her professional journey also reflects her adaptability. Before joining Hidalgo County last year, she spent 10 years as a pediatric nurse, including years doing private duty nursing for patients with complex medical needs. Those experiences shaped her understanding of physical vulnerability. She recalls sustaining an arm injury while preventing pediatric seizure patients from falling, reinforcing how much wear the nursing profession can place on the body —

and how important it is for nurses themselves to prioritize health.

Today, Romo brings that perspective to the county clinic in Pharr, where she sees a mix of clients seeking services and support. Her background in multiple care settings helps her meet people where they are, and her personal wellness journey allows her to encourage healthier habits without judgment. She participates in the Employee Wellness Program initiatives when her schedule allows and frequently supports 5K events, even if she doesn't run them, cheering on coworkers and community members from the sidelines.

Her story is one of perseverance, grounded in the reality that health is never guaranteed and movement is a privilege. She often reflects on the period when she herself struggled to walk, remembering the fear of not knowing whether her body would heal. That memory stays with her as a reminder to maintain her health — not through perfection, but through intention.

Romo acknowledges that the balance can be challenging. Between a full-time job, family responsibilities, and training for endurance events, her days can feel consumed by obligations. But she believes the effort is worth it, and she hopes her journey shows others that progress is possible even after injury, setbacks or long gaps away from exercise.

Her advice to others is simple: start with commitment. Not a burst of motivation, not a short-lived resolution — true commitment. She emphasizes that health decisions must come from within, not from external pressure. People should pursue wellness because their future depends on it, she says, because they don't want to lose independence later in life.

Now, as she prepares to become a grandmother and looks ahead to running her first full marathon, Romo carries with her the lessons of resilience, discipline, and gratitude. For her, movement is not just exercise. It's recovery. It's freedom. It's her way of honoring what her body can do today, while she has the chance.

