



Tenia Fisher, lead coach of F.E.A.R. (Forget Everything and Run), was a running star at Rufus King High School and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. But she didn't know how to channel her passion after college. PHOTOS BY ANGELA PETERSON / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Training competitors of all color

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In one way or another, Tenia Fisher's running has always been a form of activism.

The Milwaukee native started running when she was 12, finding her strength in long-distance races.

She ran in high school, taking Rufus King to state in the 800-meter run.

She ran in college, cementing her place in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Panther Hall of Fame when she graduated in 2006 with five school records to her name. She was a two-time team captain, nine-time Horizon League Champion, four-time Horizon League Athlete of the Year and three-time National Collegiate Athletic Association regional qualifier.

After graduating from UWM, Fisher was at the pinnacle of her running career — and she was lost.

"I was in a very bad slump," she recalled. "I had finished college and I was at the highest peak of running and there was just nowhere else to go now. How do I run now?"

She had loved competitive running — the thrill that came with winning races and setting records. But after graduation, she was searching for a crew. People who looked like her and could motivate her. People who reminded her that she had the right to run where she wanted, despite the stares she might receive.

As a Black runner in Milwaukee, Fisher had grown used to not seeing many other runners of color around her. She still thinks back to her high school self at the state track and field competition, the only Black girl to have made it that year in the 800-meter race.

"I wanted something more," Fisher said. "And that's when F.E.A.R. came along, and it just came at the most perfect time."

F.E.A.R. stands for "Forget Everything and Run," and that's exactly what its members do. The group's mission is to make running fun and accessible to young people of color while giving them a chance to make friends and find their place in the community.

Fisher has led the group since it started six years ago, as part of her role as the health and wellness director of Social X MKE, a young professional diversity and inclusion consulting group.

A first grade teacher at Greater Holy Temple Christian Academy by day, Fisher and F.E.A.R. have received local and national attention for the way in which they bring people of color together to run in Milwaukee, calling out issues of representation in the sport, challenging narratives around segregation in the city and encouraging young people of color to keep their talent in Milwaukee.

At the core of all of these efforts is a simple philosophy: Running is for everyone.

"You don't normally see people of color running down the lakefront or doing half marathons," Fisher said. "To be able to give people that confidence and create that space (in which) they are safe and they won't be judged, that's a big deal to me."

Visibility for Black runners

Fisher and all the members of F.E.A.R. are acutely aware of the differences of privilege that exist between white runners and runners of col-

Growing up, Tenia Fisher didn't see runners who looked like her. She's changing that.



Tenia Fisher performs dumbbell skull crushers during a workout at Brew Fitness in Shorewood.



Tenia Fisher, left, and Ranell Washington are co-captains of the F.E.A.R. running group.

or. 2020 not only brought challenges in terms of staying connected during the pandemic, but it also brought the harrowing news that Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man from Georgia, had been murdered by three white men while out on a run.

Arbery's story forced the country to more closely consider, as a Pulitzer Prize-winning piece in *Runner's World* put it, how "running fails Black America." None of these issues were new to Fisher.

"That could have been either one of my brothers. That could have been any one of my F.E.A.R. captains, my F.E.A.R. members," she said. "So that was just very personal to us, and now it serves F.E.A.R.'s mission to protest about it."

The group partnered with the Cream City Pacers podcast to host the MKE Run for Justice, donating proceeds to Urban Underground. Members marched in protests for racial justice in Milwaukee and Kenosha. They use their connections in the running community to call for more safety and diversity.

"His killing did take away some of that joy of running, to be able to feel like you're free while running," Fisher said. "Just the sense of running through your own neighborhood, you possibly could be killed because of the color of your skin."

Fisher and her captains remind their members of important safety tips for runners of color. Make sure you're wearing bright colors, college apparel or running gear. Keep one earbud out of your ear at all times.

They keep running, as their group name suggests, fearlessly.

Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes, a candidate for U.S. Senate and a former member of Social X MKE's advisory board, has been a member of F.E.A.R. for years.

He said Fisher approaches running not only with a sense of fun, but also "with a real purpose." The group works to make people feel comfortable about running in areas where they may otherwise feel out of place, despite the city's segregation.

"We're going to show up in those places where people may feel uncomfortable. We're going to show up," he said. "Because we should be there. There's nothing keeping anybody

away."

Running to inspire the world

Fisher's mission to embrace the uncomfortable is felt through the culture of F.E.A.R.

"She's great at running, but I would say she is even better at encouraging other people to run," said F.E.A.R. member Terrell Freeman. "Not just people who like to run, but welcoming in people who've either never run before or never run a certain distance. She's very welcoming in helping those people, encouraging them as well as coaching them up and helping them get better."

Danielle Nabak of Waukesha joined F.E.A.R. in 2019 with little experience with long-distance running. Though she hadn't done more than two-mile runs in a decade, Fisher motivated her to join the group in training for a half-marathon.

"She wants you to feel comfortable, but she also will challenge you to grow in running, but also just grow as a person," Nabak said.

Nabak completed her first half-marathon that same year and is now a team captain. Nabak is white and said the group has exposed her to a group of people that is diverse in terms of race but also in terms of jobs, age and more. It's also shown her the importance of showing up in a situation that is "uncomfortable in a good way."

Fisher said one of her biggest goals through F.E.A.R. is to make running less intimidating.

She wants to show people that there is no right body type, or speed or even socioeconomic status that defines a runner. Just show up, she says, and F.E.A.R. will handle the rest.

F.E.A.R. is the place where you can come and make friends with people who may not look like you. It's the place where you can start getting fit. The place where you can start volunteering. Where someone will have just the trick for how to manage your hair during and after your run.

"It's bigger than running," Fisher said. "We can change not only Milwaukee or Wisconsin, really we can inspire the world from the work that we're doing."

And in that work, the former high school and college track star no longer runs alone.

Learn more about how to join F.E.A.R. at <https://socialxmke.com/fear>.