

A History of Relay For Life

One person can make a difference. Nowhere is that more evident than with the story of Dr. Gordy Klatt and the American Cancer Society Relay For Life, which began in Tacoma, Washington, as the City of Destiny Classic 24-Hour Run Against Cancer.

In the mid-1980s, Dr. Gordy Klatt, a Tacoma colorectal surgeon, wanted to enhance the income of his local American Cancer Society office. He decided to personally raise money for the fight against cancer by doing something he enjoyed—running marathons.

In May 1985, Dr. Klatt spent a grueling 24 hours circling the track at Baker Stadium at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma for more than 83 miles. Throughout the night, friends donated \$25 to run or walk 30 minutes with him. He raised \$27,000 to fight cancer. That first year, nearly 300 of Dr. Klatt's friends, family and patients watched as he ran and walked the course.

While he circled the track those 24 hours, he thought about how others could take part. He envisioned a 24-hour team relay event that could raise more money to fight cancer. Months later he pulled together a small committee to plan the first team relay event known as the City of Destiny Classic 24-Hour Run Against Cancer.

In 1986, 19 teams took part in the first team relay event on the track at the colorful, historical Stadium Bowl and raised \$33,000. An indescribable spirit prevailed at the track and in the tents that dotted the infield.

The vision turned into over 5,200 Relay For Life events across the United States today and nearly \$5 billion in fundraising to save lives from cancer. In addition, the American Cancer Society licenses 24 non-governmental cancer organizations in other countries to hold Relay For Life events to battle cancer across the globe.

For 29 years, Relay For Life has provided inspiration and hope for millions of cancer survivors and caregivers.

What is Relay For Life Today?

The American Cancer Society Relay For Life is a life-changing event that gives everyone in communities across the globe a chance to celebrate the lives of people who have battled cancer, remember loved ones lost, and fight back against the disease. At Relay, teams of people camp out at a local high school, park, or fairground and take turns walking or running around a track or path. Each team is asked to have a representative on the track at all times during the event. Because cancer never sleeps, Relays are overnight events up to 24 hours in length.

What Happens at Relay For Life Events?

Although every Relay For Life is different, there are certain traditions at all Relays, no matter where they are held. These traditions help participants celebrate, remember, and fight back.



*Relay For Life
Founder & Cancer Survivor
Dr. Gordy Klatt*

Celebrate – The Survivors Lap

Relay starts with a Survivors Lap – an inspirational time when survivors are invited to circle the track together and help everyone celebrate the victories we've achieved over cancer. The Survivors Lap is an emotional example of how Relay participants are ensuring that more lives are saved each year – like those of each individual on the track. We also recognize and celebrate caregivers at Relay For Life. These individuals give their time, love, and support to friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers who face cancer. At Relay, people understand the frustrations and joys of being a caregiver, since the effects of cancer reach far beyond just the person diagnosed.

Remember – The Luminaria Ceremony

After dark, we honor people who have been touched by cancer and remember loved ones lost to the disease during the Luminaria Ceremony. Candles are lit inside bags filled with sand, each one bearing the name of a person touched by cancer, and participants often walk a lap in silence. As people take time to remember, those who have walked alongside others battling cancer can grieve and find healing. This is a time that truly highlights the importance of defeating this disease.

Fight Back – The Fight Back Ceremony

Last, there is a Fight Back Ceremony, where we make a personal commitment to save lives by taking up the fight against cancer. That personal commitment may be to do something as simple as getting a screening test, quitting smoking, or talking to elected officials about cancer. By taking action, people are personally taking steps to save lives and fight back against a disease that takes too much.



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