



JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-ObsERVER

Survivors and caregivers kick off Relay for Life Polk County 2015 with the "survivor lap," honoring those who are battling or have beaten cancer.

American Cancer Society 24-hour Relay for Life offers support, hope for caregivers, cancer survivors; honors, remembers those lost to cancer

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-ObsERVER

DALLAS — Becky Lindquist cried when she found out this year's Relay for Life Polk County would be issuing T-shirts to those who have cared for a loved one with cancer.

Those gray shirts with "caregiver" written across the back symbolize an often unsung, but vital part of battling cancer. Lindquist can tell two stories of being a caregiver, one for her son, Kellen, and for her mother, Deborah Kelley. Both were diagnosed with cancer in the same year.

"I'm not a (cancer) survivor," Lindquist said. "I haven't walked that road, but being a parent of a child with cancer is a pretty hard road to walk. I feel very overwhelmed and blessed by people recognizing that. It's not the same journey as a survivor, but it is a hard journey."

Saturday and Sunday, her son, now 9, and her mother participated in relay at LaCreole Middle School in Dallas. The American Cancer Society 24-hour fundraising event drew 22 teams in its 15th year in Polk County.

"I can't believe as a caregiver how blessed I am to be here with two people who were diagnosed with such a tough disease," she

said. "Here I am standing with two survivors, and I think that is a testament to what relay does."

Rick Bennett, wearing a purple "survivor" T-shirt needs only to remember how old his youngest son is to recall how many years he has survived cancer. Nash, 14, was born just days before Bennett was diagnosed with leukemia.

"He and I, in a symbolic way, share a birthday," Bennett said.

Formerly a team captain and Polk County event chairman, Bennett said he is "retired" from Relay for Life leadership, but he attends every year to walk.

"I'm just walking for myself and my family and friends," he said. "I can't not come, even if it's just by myself, if I don't have a team. I get to see all my old friends."

Members of St. Philip Catholic Church's Relay for Life team, "The Spirit Moves Us," understand the feeling. With the exception of 2005, the team has participated in relay every year since the Polk County event launched in 2001.

Team members Vicki Bailey, Sandra Tiernan and Maryanne Baker have all served as team captains at one time or another and still come out each year to support the cause.

"Every year another friend of mine has been either newly diagnosed or died," Bailey said.



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Becky Lindquist, left, and Rick Bennett walk the track at LaCreole Middle School in Dallas Saturday wearing their "care giver" and "survivor" T-shirts. They both have been involved with relay for years.

Tiernan, a 35-year cancer survivor, said it's the camaraderie only experienced at relay that continues to resonate with her.

"That's what it is all about, holding each other up," she said.

Current team captain Jeremy DePiero said he is proud of his team's legacy and its mission to "to get rid of this crappy cancer," as one team member so aptly described it.

Survivor, caregiver or team member, everyone on the track last weekend had a unique reason for participating in the event that, collectively — there are events worldwide — is the largest fundraiser for ACS.

But they all had the same goal. "It's a sad reality that there has to be this (event) every year," Bennett said. "You would like to see an empty field at some point. That is why we do what we do, but the reality is until there is a cure, there's always going to be a need for this kind of event."

Lindquist said while that cure is found, Relay for Life serves another almost equally important purpose.

She can remember her first year, when Kellen was a baby in the middle of treatment, finding hope while walking the track.

"I remember there was another child there, who I know is doing really well also, a little guy walking around with new hair growing," Lindquist said. "I was walking with Kellen completely bald and here's this little kid in a wagon and he's got all this hair growing in and a little survivor shirt."

In that moment, she thought: "We are going to be OK. That was the feeling I got from relay from the beginning, and that is such a blessing for people who are in that spot."



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Many Relay for Life Polk County teams, like Dallas-based Holy-Walka-Molies, decorated their tents to coordinate with the 2015 theme "Give Cancer the Boot."



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Kellen Lindquist, 9, carries links of a chain donating the number of years people on the survivor lap have outlived cancer. Each color represents a different type of cancer.



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Tents of Relay for Life teams were decorated in themes, such as this one, for the team Minions Fighting Cancer.



EMILY MENTZER/Itemizer-ObsERVER

Sunrise is a welcome sight to relay participants who have been walking all night in the dark, lit only by Luminarias.



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Bailey Jobe lights Luminarias Saturday for the ceremony remembering and honoring those who have had cancer.