



RELAY FOR LIFE

Event raises awareness, money, provides hope

Photos and story by Emily Mentzer
The Itemizer-Observer

INDEPENDENCE — Elizabeth Lutz, 11, was eager to participate in her first Relay for Life event on Saturday at Independence Riverview Park.

She had lost both her grandmother and grandfather to cancer.

"I wanted to do something to get rid of it," Elizabeth said.

She wasn't alone.

Hundreds packed the track in downtown Independence; 24 teams registered online, with a total of 353 participants.

The total money raised through year-long fundraisers combined with sales and silent auctions during the event brought in \$53,150, benefiting the American Cancer Society.

The crowd ranged from first-timers, like Elizabeth, to veteran relayers, like the Holy Walkamolies and the Determinators.

One team new to Relay was filled with youthful energy. Members of the Talmadge Cougars took a campsite on the corner, and willingly sprayed down any walker who passed their way — with permission, of course.

The eighth-graders put the team together after listening to a speaker in an elective class which focuses on doing a big project that benefits the community.

Students raised nearly \$1,500 toward the fight against cancer.

"The kids are providing the power; the parents are providing the support," said teacher Aaron Currier.

Students really got into the spirit of Relay, participating in theme laps and even having a contestant for Mr. Relay, a cross-dressing, fun way to raise more money during the Relay event.

Usually the event is for boys to done dresses and strut around the track, but this year the competition was open for girls to dress as boys, too.

A young man from Talmadge put on a grass skirt, coconut bra and lei, and got busy collecting donations. Whoever collected the most would win the title of Mr. Relay 2016.

Another Mr. Relay contestant came to the Talmadge Cougar's tent seeking donations. "No, No!" students chanted.

"We have a fine specimen of Mr. Relay here," the competitor's chaperone said.

"We already have our girl," the youth responded.

"Nothing wrong with having another one!" came the reply.

But students were set in their decision: there would be no supporting a second



With temperatures climbing to a record-breaking 99 degrees on Saturday, participants of Relay for Life raised money by selling cooling neck wraps. All participants had to take precautions to stay cool during the event.

Mr. Relay.

While organizers make the event fun, participants never forget the real reason they do Relay for Life: cancer.

During the luminaria ceremony, longtime worker with the Dallas Fire & EMS was honored, Terri Waller, who died of cancer last year.

The path was lined with paper lanterns remembering others who have died — or who were fighting, or who won the battle — from cancer.

For more information: relayforlife.org.



A chain made of colored paper links wrapped around the survivor's tent. Each color represents a type of cancer. The number of links added represents years each survivor at Polk County Relay for Life has battled or survived that particular cancer.



New to Relay this year, Talmadge Middle School's community enrichment class decided to put together a team to help the efforts to battle cancer and raise awareness. The young group brought a positive energy to the event.



Luminarias light the walking path at Independence Riverview Park all night. Each paper lantern honors someone who has battled cancer or who is still fighting the disease, or is in memory of someone who lost the fight. A few were in memory of pets.



This year's Relay for Life theme was "May the Cure be With You." Many tent sites were decorated with the Star Wars theme, and laps were designed to dress up as characters from the famous films. At midnight, "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" was shown.