



Debbie's Patriots captain Susanne Killian, left, and math teacher John Hardy encourage students to donate money for Relay for Life. Hardy, an N.C. State fan, promised to dress in UNC and Duke clothing if the students raise \$100 or more.

STAFF PHOTO BY JULI LEONARD

WALKERS TAKE AIM AT CANCER

Many cancer survivors are among those participating in Relay for Life

By SUSAN LONDON
CORRESPONDENT

Wakefield High School's Wolverine Stadium, usually occupied by athletes practicing drills and runners perfecting their strides, will serve a different purpose this evening when the Relay for Life of North Raleigh/Wake Forest takes place.

From 6 p.m. today through noon Saturday, the grassy field will be filled with tents, tables and more than a thousand people. Mascots Wool E. Bull, Stormy and Muddy the Mudcat will make appearances in the midst of karaoke, a dunking booth, a silent auction and live music.

All the while, members of relay teams who have spent months raising funds for cancer research will take turns walking laps along a track lit by hundreds of flickering luminarias honoring survivors and victims of the disease. The atmosphere will be one of entertainment, camaraderie and education — all for a common purpose.

The all-volunteer event, which draws participants from North Raleigh, Wake Forest and Rolesville, began in 2002 in the parking lot of an elementary school.

"There were four teams and we raised about \$8,000," recalls Chris Irving, accounting chairman for the relay.



A team will walk in memory of Deborah LaGow.

Six years later, the event has grown to more than 70 teams. The teams raise donations and turn them in at the event. More than \$103,043 had been raised as of Thursday.

Held in thousands of communities worldwide, Relay for Life is the signature fundraising event of the organization, according to Tadd Hall of the Raleigh arm of the American Cancer Society. It is symbolic of the 24 hour-a-day fight for survival by cancer patients.

Tonight's event is open to the public. Participants are encouraged to purchase a T-shirt and walk a lap.

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For profiles of relay participants whose lives have been affected by cancer, see page 3N.

BY THE NUMBERS*

\$103,283

donations

1,247

participants

77

participating survivors

18

planning members

* AS OF THURSDAY

IF YOU GO

What: Relay for Life, an annual fundraiser for the American Cancer Society. Participants purchase a T-shirt and walk a lap around the track in honor of cancer survivors and victims.

Cost: \$10 for the T-shirt

Where: Wakefield High School Wolverine Stadium, 2200 Wakefield Pines Drive

When: 6 p.m. today through noon Saturday.

More information:
www.northraleighrelay.com
www.myspace.com/nrwrkrelay

OVERHEARD: FORUM

'Year-round school can be a very positive experience if you give it a chance ... No solution is going to please everybody in the county, but the school board is tasked with implementing a plan that provides great educational opportunities for our children while making good use of our tax dollars.'

PENNY KEANE ON SHARE.TRIANGLE.COM

PROFILES: A snapshot of Relay for Life North Raleigh/Wake Forest participants

Susanne Killian has been touched by cancer the way many people have — through family and acquaintances who have fought the disease.

Killian, whose mother-in-law and sister-in-law have had breast cancer, has been involved with the American Cancer Society since 2000, through Susan G. Komen for the Cure and the Relay for Life.

Now a career development coordinator at Heritage Middle School, the 39-year-old Wake Forest resident is team captain of Debbie's Patriots, a team honoring Deborah Hunt LaGow, a former Heritage colleague who worked in student services.

LaGow was diagnosed with soft tissue sarcoma shortly after coming to work at Heritage. She battled the rare and aggressive form of the disease for two years before she died last summer.

More than 44 people are on Killian's team, including members of LaGow's family and many Heritage employees and students. Killian notes



Killian's team honors Deborah LaGow, who died last summer.

that she's spent her career working in schools and has found them to be a great place to raise money.

Killian said that the Heritage community has been particularly supportive, and that their involvement played a big part in the healing process.

Debbie's Patriots have been working all year to raise money. So far, their efforts have netted more than \$5,000 through creative and fun events like faculty student basketball games. A kiss-the-pig contest provided students with the opportunity to buy votes for a chosen teacher with the "winning" teacher finding themselves face-to-face with a real pig.

Killian appreciates the relay's educational component.

"It provides information about early detection, why people need to give money and the advances that have taken place in cancer research," she said. "The people are all out for a good cause."

Tracey Lackey had always been the picture of health. Then she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease at 28, just months after getting married.

She and her husband "were just starting our life together," said Lackey, now 32. "Having cancer throws some kinks into that first year. Everyone tells you the main fights are about money. Having cancer is a shock."

After six months of chemotherapy and one month of radiation that ended in October 2003, Lackey's cancer went into remission and she began looking for ways to get involved in the fight against the disease.

She'd never heard of the Relay for Life, but after she submitted an inquiry on the American Cancer Society's Web site, she received a call within five minutes from an ACS coordinator. Lackey agreed to be a co-chairwoman for the event in 2004.

She also formed a relay team called Lackey Friends and Fam-

ily. The first year, several local friends as well as her mother, aunt and father-in-law participated.

In 2006, Lackey gave up the co-chair position, opting to focus on the luminaria committee, her favorite part of the event.

During the luminaria ceremony, hundreds of the bags with candles, purchased for \$10 in honor of cancer victims and survivors, line the track as relay participants walk among them, looking for names they recognize.

"It's very quiet — a time for people to walk around and reflect," said Lackey.

October will mark four years since Lackey completed her treatment. After five years of no recurrence, her doctors will consider her cancer cured.

Regardless, Lackey realizes cancer is something that will stay with her for the rest of her life.

So will the relay. Said Lackey, who also works with the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, "I'll definitely continue to be involved."



Lackey was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease at 28.

Most participants of the Relay for Life take turns walking laps during the overnight event. But Chris Irving, 35, likes to spend an hour running.

Irving, accounting chairman of the North Raleigh/Wake Forest relay, said he's not an avid runner

— he's more likely to be found cycling in his spare time — but during his first year, his team had a lot of youth participants who thought it would be fun. Ever since, the midnight run has been a tradition.

Irving became involved with the relay in 2002, after completing treatment for testicular cancer. Diagnosed in June 2001, he had surgery and radiation after doctors gave him two choices.

"They said, 'Do you want to have surgery today or tomorrow?'" Irving recalled with a laugh.

While undergoing treatment at Rex Healthcare Hospital, Irving picked up information about volunteerism with the American Cancer Society but didn't give it much

attention until a Rex staff member asked if he wanted to become involved. Around the same time, the ACS was adding a North Raleigh event to Wake County's roster.

Irving said his involvement has been a good outlet for the "Why me?" mentality. It's also an opportunity to give back. He thinks if people before him hadn't volunteered and helped raise money, the treatment that helped him might not have existed.

Cancer-free for nearly six years, Irving no longer has frequent scans to check for recurrence. Though he's glad to have come this far, Irving admits there's peace of mind in those regular visits.

"You do have doubts ... days when something feels off and a little voice asks if you're just tired, getting older — or is the cancer back?" said Irving.

Nevertheless, he thinks his experience has been more of a blessing than a curse. He has survived and has become a better person, he said.



Irving helped start the one hour midnight run tradition.

In 1997, Harold "H.P." Pelzel went to the doctor complaining of swelling in his legs. The subsequent diagnosis of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma led him on a journey that included chemotherapy, radiation, more chemotherapy and a clinical trial.

Nothing worked. When his cancer became aggressive, a risky stem cell transplant was his last option.

"They tell you there's a 50 percent chance of dying of the transplant," said Pelzel, now 60. "But I had a 100 percent chance of dying if I didn't do it."

Pelzel and his wife, Sandy, moved from Raleigh to Houston to receive the transplant and six months of follow-up therapy at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, one of the premier facilities in the country. His tenacity paid off and today Pelzel's cancer is in remission.



Pelzel and his wife sell glass art to support the ACS.

When Pelzel moved back to Raleigh, the American Cancer Society was looking for someone to continue the efforts with the local Relay for Life. Pelzel had been involved with other relay events in the past and readily took over as event chairman in 2004.

Pelzel, a consultant for Management Systems International, credits his business expertise in motivating the all-volunteer staff. "Working with volunteers, you have to find out how much they can do," he said. Pelzel asks team captains after the first year if they want to participate again and whether they're willing to increase their responsibilities.

Even today, Pelzel doesn't consider himself cured.

"The longer you don't have it, the better," says Pelzel. "Being alive six years later is quite a gift. Every day is a gift."