



# At Relay for Life, community bonds in cancer fight

Luminary bags line the track at Hood River Valley High School. The bags are adorned with messages to loved ones who have been affected by cancer.

Story and photos by **BEN MITCHELL**  
News staff writer

People from all walks of life came to Hood River Valley High School last Saturday to participate in Relay for Life of the Columbia Gorge and help end one of the most devastating diseases known to humankind: cancer.

Approximately 250 people registered for the 24-hour event, which helped raise \$17,000 for the American Cancer Society, according to initial tallies. Participants walk around the oval track at the high school to raise money for ACS and enjoy music, food, games, and other activities. Many local businesses also donate and help sponsor Relay for Life, which has been held for 17 years in the Gorge.

Traditionally located at the high school, Relay for Life has been held the past three years at the Hood River County Fairgrounds in Odell — a move that was initially made in 2010 while the school's track was getting renovated. Event Chair Veronica Moline explained Relay for Life returned to the high school this year due to popular demand.

"We had a lot of requests to come back to the track because it's hard for a lot of people to walk on the grass, and it being farther away from town," she said of the Odell venue.

Although this is her first year chairing the event, Moline, who works at Rosauers in Hood River, said she has been involved with Relay since it first started in the Gorge 17 years ago. Like so many others at the event, Moline has lost family members to cancer, including her grandmother and aunt, and hopes the fundraising efforts for ACS will help cure the disease.

"I have eight grandkids and I never want them to hear the phrase, 'You have cancer,'" she said.

Known as "the official sponsor of birthdays," ACS recently celebrated its 100th birthday this year, a milestone Relay for Life of the Columbia Gorge Survivor Co-Chair M.J. Newcomb touched on during her speech at the event's opening ceremonies.

"A hundred years ago, a cancer diagnosis got you a ride around Central Park with a bottle of champagne, because they wanted you to have a nice memory to carry with you to your death," she said.

Newcomb spoke of how cancer is less of a death sentence now than it was 100 years ago and said two out of three people diagnosed with the disease today survive.

"We have come a long way," she said. "I think it's important to remind people how far we've come."

While Newcomb lost her father, Michael, to cancer 10 years ago — "my reason for being here," she noted — her husband of 25 years, Harry, is a prostate cancer survivor of six years.

"He had one treatment and he's been cancer-free since then," she said proudly.

Hood River resident Martha Hoskins, 72, is a 13-year breast cancer survivor who never viewed her diagnosis as a death sentence.

"Absolutely, I never thought it was, because I had the support of my family," she said. "I never thought anything bad would happen."

Hoskins walked hand-in-hand with her friend Gladys Edwards, 78, also of Hood River, during the Survivor Lap ceremony, where those who have survived cancer do a lap around the track to cheers and applause and get recognition for beating the disease. Edwards is a four-year survivor of breast cancer, but noted she was here because of her son, Craig, who passed away 17 years ago from cancer, which she believed was a direct result of his coming into contact with contaminants while serving in the Persian Gulf War.

"My son was a city police officer here and he died of sarcoma," Edwards said. "He was 30 years old. That's why I'm here."

As for her own struggles with cancer, Edwards said she was just happy to be here.

"Every year is good," she said.

While cancer is often viewed as a disease the primarily afflicts the elderly and middle-aged, even young people are at risk. The youngest survivor present at Relay for Life was Allan Olivas, who is only 6 years old. Earlier this year, Allan had a brain tumor removed at Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland and is now a six-month survivor.

"He's still in treatment, but he's holding up pretty well," said Samuel Olivas, his father, who spoke on behalf of a very shy Allan.

Samuel, who works at Walmart, and his wife, Carmen, who works at Duckwall Fruit, were down in Mexico last year for Christmas vacation when they noticed their son was losing his balance. Doctors discovered a tumor and inserted a shunt into Allan's brain to make sure the tumor didn't block the flow of spinal fluid while his parents made plans to rush him back to the United States for surgery.

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**EVENT CHAIR** Veronica Moline addresses the crowd during the opening ceremonies of the event. Below, Stella Joyer Christiansen, 7, of Denmark, splashes down at the end of her ride on a slip n' slide which was set up on a hill behind the track to help kids (and adults) cool off. Hood River residents Martha Hoskins (left) and Gladys Edwards, both breast cancer survivors, smile as spectators applaud them during the Survivor Lap ceremony. At lower right, Sofia Carabantes, 4, of Hood River, stares at a lock of her hair held by Ashley Allen, of Hood River, who cut it off for the Locks of Love charity.



*'I have eight grandkids and I never want them to hear the phrase, "You have cancer."'*

**VERONICA MOLINE**



**SAMUEL OLIVAS** (far left), of Hood River, walks with his son, **Allan** (to his immediate right) and others during the Survivor and Caregiver Lap Saturday morning. Allan, who is 6 years old and attends Westside Elementary, was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had surgery to remove it earlier this year. He is currently undergoing treatment at Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland.





Photos by Kirby Neumann-Rea

LAVENDER DAZE

Crowds thronged to the bright purple and white lavender fields at Hood River Lavender Farms near Odell for cuttings of the aromatic flowers, to enjoy food and hear music, and soak up sun and scenery at the ninth-annual Lavender Daze. Co-owner Joe Orcutt and his mother, Naomi, relax — for a while — in the shade. Above, Matt Dorn of Beaverton waits for family members, holding u-cut flowers.

RELAY

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“It was a pretty shocking experience,” Samuel said. Allan has been receiving radiation and chemotherapy at Doernbecher, which requires him to periodically travel to the Portland hospital for three days at a time. His parents stay overnight with him and Samuel said he was grateful for how sup-

portive his and Carmen’s coworkers have been in their time of need, as well as Allan’s school, Westside Elementary. Though the radiation and chemotherapy tire Allan, he showed great resolve during the event, despite having to undergo a treatment the night before. “He’s still walking over there,” Samuel said late Saturday morning while pointing to Allan, who was several lengths ahead of his fa-

ther on the track. After the survivors and other participants finished walking the track and the weather heated up in the afternoon, many took to relaxing with slushies, slip n’ slides, and a barbecue while others sat and watched people participate in limbo and hula hoop contests and other fun activities. The highlight of the evening, as is with all Relay for Life events, was the Luminaria Ceremony. As the

activities wound down, white paper bags were set around the inside loop of the track and illuminated with battery-operated candles. The crowd moved silently around the track to look at the bags, which were adorned with handwritten messages to those affected by cancer. One, addressed to a survivor. “Good job!” Another, to a family member whose battle wasn’t over

yet. “Keep fighting, brother.” Again, for another family member — one who lost her battle. “Mom, I love you, I miss you, I bless you, I release you.” Finally, written in a child’s scrawl, a plea to a higher power: “Help us, God.” A picnic will be held in Jackson Park on Wednesday, Aug. 14, at 6 p.m. to hand out

certificates and read the final totals for the Relay for Life fundraising efforts. The event is free and open to the public. Photo by Ben Mitchell

**SURVIVORS** face the crowd during the opening ceremonies of Relay for Life on Saturday morning, proudly displaying sheets of paper that show how many years they have survived since receiving their cancer diagnoses.



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