Relay For Life: Carving a benevolent path

Becker blazes trails during Osage County's first 10 years of cancer fundraising

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Staff Writer

In May of 1985, Dr. Gordy Klatt, of Tacoma, Wash., reached a crossroads in his life. He wanted to show support for his patients who had had cancer and also wanted to help generate income for his local American Cancer Society chapter. The road he chose would change his life, and the lives of countless others, forever.

Klatt first decided to spend 24 hours circling the track at Baker Stadium in Tacoma. He ran for 83 miles. Throughout the night, friends donated $25 to run or walk with him for 30 minutes. His efforts raised $27,000 to fight cancer.

During his 83-mile run, Klatt thought about how others could take part in his mission to fight cancer. Envisioning a 24-hour team relay event that could raise more money, he pulled together a small committee to plan the first team relay event.

In 1986, with the help of Pat Flynn – now known as the "Mother of Relay" – 19 teams took part in the first team relay event on the track at the historic Stadium Bowl and raised $33,000.

The Mother of Osage County's Relay For Life, Ann Becker, Melvern, chose her road much earlier than Platt. Becker has been interested in, and involved with, the American Cancer Society for over 50 years. She's also co-chaired Osage County's Relay For Life for its entire 10-year existence. However, unlike Platt, Becker isn't sure where her interest stems from. While she had a great aunt that had cancer, she's been fortunate enough to avoid having any immediate family members stricken with the disease.

Becker says the amount of time she devotes to the relay depends on the time of year. When it's closer to the time of the relay, she spends two to three hours per week on the event. The modest Becker said her job as co-chair isn't that challenging at all because of "the wonderful committee" she works with. In fact, the people she has met through her work on the committee is one of her favorite things about the position.

"I've developed friendships with people I would have never even met," she said. "I've really enjoyed getting to know my committee members, and other people in the community as well."

One such committee

Ann Becker

member who has been with Becker since the beginning, co-survivor coordinator, Eva Anschutz, Lyndon, says that Becker's committee members have as high of an opinion of her as she does of them. "Her leadership and involvement were crucial to starting the county program and they continue to be important to this day. Osage County Relay For Life wouldn't exist if it wasn't for Ann."

Besides meeting people and building friendships, there are other aspects of her role as co-chair that Becker also enjoys.

"I love the fun and excitement of the event. I love walking around the track and watching younger kids have fun on the football field. It's good, clean fun," she said. "I also really enjoy looking at the luminaria bags as I walk around the track. I see names on the bags and they remind me of special things about the people, like so and so could really bake a good pie. I really enjoy the memories."

Seeing younger people at the event gives her hope that the kids will get involved when they get older. "I hope they look back 10, 15 years from now and say, 'Hey, that was a lot of fun. Let's get involved.'"

Becker admits that finding teams is her biggest concern as co-chair. She said too often she hears people say they never thought of getting involved with the event until cancer affects them personally.

"If you haven't been to a relay, make it a point to see what is going on," she said. "Don't wait until it directly concerns you. The relays offer hope, companionship, and healing. They're so much more than a fundraiser."

Judging by the people she has helped, the approximately $300,000 she has raised, and the impact she's had on the community, Ann Becker is so much more than a co-chair. She's a model of what a person can do when he or she wants to make a difference.

Relay For Life is a life-changing event that brings together more than 3.5 million people every year to celebrate the lives of those who have battled cancer, remember loved ones lost, and empower individuals and communities to fight back against a disease that takes so much. Osage County's teams will gather at Lyndon High School's track for an overnight relay to join the fight against cancer from 6 p.m. Sept. 27 until 6 a.m. Sept. 28.

Information from www.relayforlife.org was used in this article.

Julie McNickle/Contributing Photographer
Supporters take turns walking laps during the 12-hour fundrasing effort, which lasts from 6 p.m. on a Saturday night to 6 a.m. the next day.

Julie McNickle/Contributing Photographer
Cancer survivors walk the first lap at Relay For Life Sept. 22, 2007, in Lyndon.

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