

The American Cancer Society's Relay for Life is more about people than it is about cancer. Don't get me wrong, if it weren't for cancer, we wouldn't have the Relay. But if it weren't for the indomitable spirits of so many wonderful human beings, cancer would be quietly eating its way through countless bodies—and lives—and taking control.

Most of us know at least one victim of cancer: I lost my mother eight years ago and a very dear friend two years ago. But how many of us know people who are the victims of cancer? People who fought the battle, won, and are still winning? People who are taking control of the cancer?

Have you seen Lance Armstrong's recent television commercial? All you see on the TV screen is his face and all you hear is his one-on-one chat with cancer. It's a spit-in-your-face conversation, with him thanking cancer for making him a stronger, better person.

Many cancer survivors have that same attitude; many friends and loved ones of cancer victims do, as well.

Dr. Gordon Klatt, a colorectal surgeon in Tacoma, Washington, was one of those friends. In May of 1985, as a way to personally help raise funds for fighting cancer, he spent 24 hours on a university track and clocked over 83 miles. Throughout that 24-hour period, friends paid \$25 for the

privilege of helping him raise funds by walking or running with him for 30 minutes. Dr. Klatt raised \$27,000. The following year, the first Relay for Life took place; 19 teams participated and raised \$33,000.

Communities all over the country hold Relays. Missoula's Relay for Life is held at Big Sky High School in June of each year. It begins late in the afternoon on a Friday and continues overnight until mid-morning on Saturday. Numerous teams band together to raise money for the American Cancer Society's fight against cancer. Each team consists of about 8-12 members; each team member commits to raise at least \$100 in donations prior to the event. Team members walk the track during the entire event; at least one team member is walking at all times.

The community gathering celebrates current and former cancer patients, their families, caregivers, and supporters. Tents are pitched for team members staying overnight; entertainment is provided; an endless supply of food and treats sustain team members and supporters. The atmosphere is one of celebration and sharing: everyone brings a cooler of munchies, lawn chairs, warm clothing, and a heart filled with love and hope.

Cancer Survivors and their caregivers kick off the Relay for Life by walking the first lap around the track. They

receive tee shirts in a color different from those of the other participants and their special brand of courage is applauded during their victory lap. Last year, I constantly sought out the people wearing the dark purple shirts throughout the event—they were a tangible sign of perseverance and triumph.

After dark, a Luminaria Ceremony is held to remember those who have lost their battle with cancer and to pay tribute to those who have survived. Candles are placed inside decorated containers that line the entire track, sometimes two and three deep; each bears the name of a special person. All are left to burn during the evening. An announcer reads the name of each individual and, while the ceremony is solemn, many survivors walk the track during it, bearing testimony to those indomitable spirits I mentioned earlier. Those of us who have loved ones to remember tend to walk during the entire Luminaria ceremony, saying our prayers and listening for the sound of those very special names.

Saturday morning's events revolve around congratulating the teams, and individual team members, not only for their fundraising achievements but also for their personal successes in walking many miles.

How many miles, I wonder, do the survivors walk? Not around the track during Relays, not up and down corridors in

hospitals and medical facilities, not pacing in the privacy of their homes. But in life experience, in adversity, in growth.

I spoke recently with Missoula resident, Brendan Moles, a cancer survivor. Brendan believes that he's more attuned to the important things in life now, more aware. He actually told me he's lucky. I swear it, that's what he said. How can someone who survived cancer, and the chemo and radiation, and the emotional roller coaster, and yes—that awful, gripping fear, how can he truly believe he's lucky?

I guess it's all in your perspective. Brendan said that his cancer was caught in its early stages and that Hodgkin's is one of the forms of cancer that has a high recovery rate. I understand that his cancer wasn't as advanced, or serious, or threatening—like my friend's cancer, which was diagnosed as terminal right from the start. But I still don't buy that Brendan's Hodgkin's was "lucky" cancer.

It's been eight years since Brendan's last treatment and there are no signs of returning cancer. Sure, he said, he's more likely to get Leukemia than the next guy, but it doesn't mean he's going to get it. And sure, his Hodgkin's might come back. But his doctor doesn't think it will, his research indicates that he has an excellent chance of not having cancer

knocking at his door again, so he chooses to believe he's fully cured. Yep, he says, he's lucky.

Brendan Moles possesses one of those indomitable spirits I mentioned. He's a soft-spoken guy, unassuming, seemingly normal. But deep down inside, where it counts, he possesses a courage that I hope I never have to dig deep for. I may not find it.

Think about those people you know, the people who've battled cancer. What kind of strength does it take to stare cancer in the eye and face your mortality? What kind of endurance does it take to live your life, beating back the fear and refusing to give it control? What kind of courage does it take to know that today may be the last time you'll kiss your wife? Or that tomorrow your daughter might not have a father? How do you handle all those things and not fall apart?

I doubt I'll ever again complain about aching feet after walking around a track for a few hours. I probably won't whine about the cold, or too-bright lights at night, or the drive home at 1:00am on the Friday night of this year's Relay. Actually, all my excuses for not staying overnight at the past two Relays seem kind of lame.

When compared to the battles, struggles, and hardships of countless cancer victims, trotting around that track for sixteen hours is really a piece of cake.

Why don't you join us this June? Show your support of these indomitable spirits by joining a team, volunteering for the American Cancer Society, or simply showing up and cheering them on. For more information about Missoula's Relay for Life, contact Board Member Deirdre Flaherty at 549-6718.