



PHOTO BY SUSIE ALDIBERT

Arm raised in victory, Joanne Tolbert launches the survivor's lap in 2009 when Relay for Life came back to Orange County.

a purple ORANGE

and treatment. Cancer Advocacy maintains a political presence in the hallways of local, state and federal government. Reach to Recovery matches women diagnosed with breast cancer with survivors. Look Good...Feel Better has tips for personal appearance, and in fact, at our local Relay, teams of hairdressers will be taking donations of "Locks of Love" so cancer victims can have natural wigs when they lose their hair

smoking, eat right, be active, protect yourself from hazards like the sun and other known carcinogens.

This year's Relay for Life starts at 3 p.m., Saturday, May 21, on the Orange County High School track. "This walk will continue from that time until 6 a.m. Sunday morning," says Joanne because, "cancer never sleeps. So we continue that walk all night long."

It's never too late to be an individual walker, a team member or a sponsor. Go to relayforlife.org/orangeva for more details. The first lap features survivors, who are joined, on the second lap, by caregivers, followed by the children's and team laps. Then the public is invited. Just show up, pay \$3 for a bead string and start walking. For every lap

you do, you put a purple bead on the string. When you get tired, you can stop and take advantage of the myriad activities and attractions going on, everything from a womanless beauty pageant to a moon bounce.

The goal this year is \$50,000. They will most likely make it and then some. More importantly is the hidden benefit, the sense of community Relay for Life will generate; folks from Flat Run to Eheart, all ages, races, and back-

grounds; all coming together in the middle of the night to fight this terrorist of the human body; to provide a lifesaving and life-prolonging bucket for Sharon...and Melanie...and Mary...and Joanne...and...

to chemotherapy. Other programs include Man to Man for prostate cancer survivors, Road to Recovery, which provides transport to treatment facilities, Hope Lodges which are places for traveling cancer patients to stay, the Cancer Survivors network on the Internet and Cancer Scholarships for college age students diagnosed with cancer. The list goes on.

The other equally important part of Relay for Life is cancer awareness.

"Get that awareness out for that better prevention out," stresses Joanne, "that people will go for their check-ups, go get those prostate check-ups, go get those mammograms, go get that colonoscopy." Also know the warning signs, stop

Relay for Life is not just about one all-night walk around a track; it is a year-long, faith-based, grass roots community fundraising and cancer

awareness effort, complete with yard and bake sales, spaghetti dinners, and the rest of it. The lion's share of the money raised during the year and at the walk goes, of course, to

cancer research. "Our main goal is that cure. We...want...that...cure," says Joanne, rapping the table with her knuckles. "But until that cure is found, what we want now...is to find things that can fight it."

The money raised from Relay for Life goes towards other things too. It helps fund a cancer hotline, where you can get answers to questions ranging from treatment side effects in the middle of the night to dealing with depression. The "I Can Cope" program disseminates information about diagnoses

Cancer comes in many colors: pink for breast cancer, white for bone cancer and purple for pancreatic cancer. But purple is first and foremost the color of survivors. You should see it everywhere in Orange right about now.

Cancer survivor, Melanie Gallihugh wears purple all the time anyway.

"We're suited up. We're ready. Any day, any time." That's what it takes to beat cancer...to be ready to fight any day, any time.

"Fight! fight! fight! fight! fight!" Cancer survivor, Joanne Tolbert, also dressed in purple, sounds the cheer. Over the past three years, with a team of trusted volunteers too numerous to name, she has brought Relay for Life back to Orange County. Diagnosed with breast cancer in 1996, hers has been a tough road, but she has learned from other survivors, "you can beat this."

7 warning signs of cancer

- A change in bowel or bladder habits
- A sore that won't heal
- Unusual bleeding or discharge
- A lump in the breast or elsewhere
- Difficulty swallowing
- Noticeable changes in a wart or mole
- A constant cough or hoarseness

a BUCKET for Sharon

The way Sharon Stephens sees it, she's in a leaky boat, and she's bailing furiously to stay afloat. Sometimes the water level is up to her waist. Sometimes only her feet are wet. "But just because your feet are wet doesn't mean your bucket's not working."

Sharon has what she unemotionally terms "stage four breast cancer or terminal breast cancer or non-curable breast cancer." It's gone to her spine, both hips and one rib. If it spreads to other organs, like her liver for example, her boat is going to sink.

Her bailing bucket represents the medical profession and what it can provide her in the way of new treatments and drugs to keep this beast at bay. But eventually, "the cancer gets smarter than the drugs that you are taking. And then it continues to grow and it breaks out of the bone, and then it's time to start a new drug."

Sharon Stephens tells her story in flat, matter-of-fact tones from her modest home in Gordonsville. Occasionally however, her eyes well up, as she recalls the fight that she has waged for the past nine years. These are not tears of self pity; anything but. They are tears of determination, spunk, anger even. "I don't like the word survivor for me personally, because I think that unless I have a car wreck or I fall down a flight of stairs and break my neck, I'm going to die from my breast cancer...I'm more of a fighter. That's what I do."

Today's rain is keeping her from her garden, and tomorrow she has to start bailing again, when she goes in for another round of chemo. Yet your jaw will drop in awe when she tells you unhesitatingly, "I've never been happier in my life. Living with this illness really makes you realize what's important and what's not important."

Like the "dream house" with the swimming

pool on Barracks Road that she and her husband bought in 2002; it's not important anymore. She had just turned 43. It was going to be her year. Then, not long after she had

day when I was at the gym and didn't have breast cancer; that's what I want to do," she replied defiantly.

She had a mastectomy and ruefully



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Sharon Stevens of Gordonsville enjoys life to its fullest even though she has non-curable breast cancer.

her mammogram, "I found the lump. It just came out of nowhere." She had done everything right: routine check-ups, no family history, "a perfect size eight," exercised, ate right, the works.

She remembers the doctors giving her "all of these options," and asking her what she wanted to do? "I want to go back to yester-

recalls how other women would timidly ask, "Did you have to lose your breast?" Well, yeah! "That was the easiest thing I ever did is lose the breast!" she snorts indignantly. Easy when you consider what she underwent after that; six months of chemo, losing her hair, throwing up all the time, followed by three months of radiation.

And the doctor wanted to follow all that up with another three months of chemo and she replied that she was "wore ass out." They misinterpreted that to mean she didn't want any more treatment. "I just said I was getting wore ass out; I didn't say I was tired of doing it. I'm not tired of living!"

It gets worse. They put her on an anti-estrogen drug to simulate menopause. She laughs. "In the year that was going to be my year, I was bald; I was breast-less; I was sick, I was exhausted. I felt like I had aged 20 years. All those drugs put weight on you. I gained weight. I was menopausal; hot flashes. Oh my poor husband." She remembers setting a cooler of ice by the bed; changing the sopping wet sheets three times a night. "I would get so hot, I would vomit at night. This went on for years!"

Then, they decided to make the menopause thing complete; she should have a hysterectomy. And when she went in for a routine pre-surgery X-Ray, they found the lesions on her spine. A bone biopsy that "felt like somebody had been on top of me with a post hole digger," confirmed their worse fears. The cancer had spread. "And when you go from curable to non-curable, you just think you're going to be dead tomorrow."

She went to Johns Hopkins. The doctor looked at her pathology report and said, "I would say with all certainty that this person would be dead. And yet, there you sit in that chair." So I had nowhere to go but up from that." She was given three years to live. That was five years ago.

"They go from 'fight! fight! fight! fight! fight!'" her voice lowers, dripping with sarcasm "to 'quaaal-ity of life.' It's all about quality of life now... You need to figure out what you want to do with whatever time you have left and enjoy it'... so that you can have this elusive 'quaaal-

ity of life.'" She juts her jaw in defiance. "I wasn't ready for quality of life," she snaps. "I was still in fighter mode. It's hard to go in one day from fighter mode to quaaal-ity of life."

Actually, Sharon Stephens' life is brimming with quality. She learned from a friend to "Figure out what you don't want to do and get rid of that.' And that's what I slowly but surely did. I got rid of the job. We got rid of the house because my chemo, that I do every three weeks for almost five years now, costs \$14,000." That's per three-week session!

Most importantly this inspiring woman is actually happy. "Life is better," she shrugs. "It really is better... You don't sweat the small stuff. It's just all the things that I thought were important, weren't. And all the things that I took for granted are the things that are important... I love it. I've never been happier in my whole life, to realize you don't need all those things. I love it... For the most part, I feel really good. For the most part you just keep on keeping on."

This coming Saturday, Sharon Stephens will lead her team of Gordonsville Girl Scouts around the OCHS track in the Relay for Life. The way she sees it, she's on "the receiving end," of this local American Cancer Society fundraising and cancer awareness event. "Thanks to Relay for Life and other things like that, there are going to be more drugs in a couple of years and I can use them all. My job is to store them all up like a little chipmunk and hold onto them for as long as I can and hope that they work for as long as they do until the cancer gets smarter than the drugs."

She smiles, almost dreamily. "I live my life just like everybody else lives their life; I just have to keep bailing."

So if you're out on that track in the wee hours of Sunday morning and start wondering just what it is you're doing out there, look at it like this: you're providing a bucket for Sharon.



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

Some people walk the quarter mile OCHS track all night. In 2009, Eric Cassavagh logged 29 miles, some of them in his bare feet. Each bead on the string he's holding represents one lap.

the big C

That's what they call it behind its ugly back. "The Big C." Cancer.

According to the American Cancer Society, cancer is the "general name for a group of more than 100 diseases in which cells in a part of the body begin to grow out of control." But around here they call it "The Big C."

The American Cancer Society also says three out of four families are affected by it. But a valid argument could be made that all of us are affected, because even if you don't have it, or have a relative or loved one or friend or co-worker who does, you're still living with the fear of it.

Local physician, Dr. Michael Sylvester has been dealing with "The Big C" for 32 years now. He says, "I think that fear of cancer is not unlike many other fears that we have and it's the fear of the unknown... It has a veil of secrecy associated with it."

We're like wildebeests waiting to be singled out by the cheetah. We all dread the fateful fearful phone call, "I'd like you to drop by the office so we can talk about your tests." Dr. Sylvester has had to deliver this devastating news many times, and he says that phone call that gives it all away is "really heinous."

"Because we're in family practice, we get to know people ... usually the whole family, intimately. It's pretty devastating. And the difficulty is not just informing somebody that you know and like and may be friends with, but... somehow trying to keep a certain distance so that you might still be useful to that person therapeutically. What that person doesn't need me to be doing in most cases is hugging and crying together with them... I can't be useful to that person in that circumstance. So that's where I

find a great deal of difficulty personally." When Dr. Sylvester first came here, "we were in the dark ages... It's a ton better than it was 32 years ago when I started. In comparison to what we have to treat cancer today, we had nothing. Many of the cancers had less than 5 or 10 percent five-year survival."

The treatment (radiation and chemotherapy)



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Melanie Gallihugh is a survivor of Hodgkins Lymphoma. Following chemotherapy, radiation and chemotherapy again, her hair started to grow back.

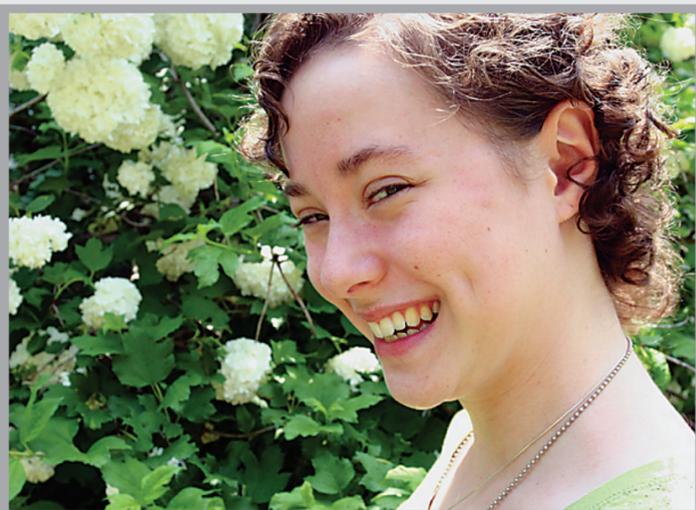


PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Mary Strunck was diagnosed the Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia at age 14. Two years later, she's on the mend. She credits her faith in God for helping her through the ordeal.

was almost as bad as the disease itself, basically burning tumors and injecting poison into the body that not only took out the cancer, but the body's good cells along with it. But like new shoots after a forest fire, it was, and still is hoped, the good cells come back and not the cancerous ones. "The only thing that you were giving folks back then when I started was the hope that if you can get through the next three months, six months, nine months of weight loss and throwing up and loss of your hair, etcetera, you might get better."

Nowadays, you've got a better chance. Although the basic premise of chemotherapy hasn't changed, "now there are hundreds of chemotherapeutic agents and different ways of

doing them." Dr. Sylvester says today chemo is, "hundreds and hundreds of drugs," with new ones, new buckets for Sharon, being developed "almost daily."

Are we closer to a cure? "Yeah, we're closer than we were, but we're not there. And it's almost impossible to say how far we are." So in the meantime, while we're waiting for the silver bullet, we'll develop more buckets so people like Sharon Stephens can continue to bail their sinking boats.

Another sobering statistic from the American Cancer Society: "half of all men and one third of all women in the U.S. will develop cancer

describes the experience.

Just because it is 95 percent curable does not make the cure any easier. First chemo, then radiation, then chemo again; she lost weight; couldn't even keep a hula hoop up on her hips. She lost her hair, refused to wear a wig and graduated bald. And she adds, "as soon as the chemo hit in the IV it was ... the worst taste ever." She got sick, "a lot."

The second round of chemo, "I wanted to give up, but I didn't. Mama threw me in the car and we went right on back up to UVA." Today, at age 23, Melanie Gallihugh has all her hair. She is cancer-free. She's sporting an engage-



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Joanne Tolbert, left, who led the effort to bring Relay for Life back to Orange County, talks with Shirley Sergent, about this weekend's event.

ment rock on her fourth finger. She works as a receptionist at Orange Family Physicians and says the cancer "was one of the biggest reasons that I got into health care."

Advice to others, and this is echoed by every survivor and fighter interviewed for this article: "Just live life every day. Don't regret anything. Life's too short to regret. Don't look back; just keep going forward."

Mary Strunck will say the same thing. A vivacious 16-year-old, she's coming off a two-year battle with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, known as ALL. This is a curable form of children's cancer, and although she's not completely well, she is definitely doing better. A devout catholic, she admits being angry

with God at first, "but I've really come to appreciate the redemptive power of suffering... If I didn't have my faith I probably would have broken down a long time ago."

Her advice to a 14-year-old who has been diagnosed with cancer sounds familiar. "I would tell her to not worry about the stuff that hasn't happened yet. You just want to cross the bridges when you come to them."

Mary's mom, Patty Strunck provides insight into what the sometimes forgotten caregivers go through. "It hurts to see your child suffer like that. It's hard on the other family members because you have to devote so much time. But you can't neglect them."

Family and neighbor support helped immeasurably. So did an Internet bulletin board called Caringbridge.org.

"I have to say this. Cancer has made her a better person," she hugs her daughter. "It's made us better. You appreciate what you have." In the treatment room at UVA, the nurses would fight over who would get Mary; she was so polite and uncomplaining.

Back at Orange Family Physicians, another caregiver, Donna Diaz describes what it was like to care for her mother who eventually died of lung cancer. "As tough as it was, it probably was the best nine months of my life. It's unreal how it

makes you appreciate life and live. It was a very tough thing but it was a gift on the other hand. I learned so much from it."

In the wee hours of Sunday morning, Donna and Doctor Sylvester and a few other members of their 104-member team will still be out there walking those quarter-mile laps for Relay for Life. "I'll be out there... all night," confirms Dr. Sylvester, because cancer never sleeps, and he and the others out there don't want to give "The Big C" the slightest advantage. "It is eerily fun," he laughs. "You get punch-drunk at some point during the night and you get goofy and things seem really funny."

That's because they're laughing "The Big C" in the face.