



Relay for Life: 'These People Inspire You' Chantilly Relay for Life is June 6.

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Luminarias create the word, "Hope," during last year's event. Photo Courtesy of Jackie Katounas

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The annual Relay for Life raises money for the American Cancer Society. And for Erin Hamm, of Centreville's Manorgate community, it's personal.

"I started participating a few years ago," she said "My husband had cancer and a friend of mine needed more teammates for her Relay team. So I dragged my husband along and he loved it, and we've been doing it ever since."

Then last year, she was diagnosed with cancer. But, said Hamm, "You hear stories like this all the time. And we want to tell people that cancer's not a death sentence, anymore — and this event is one thing we can do to help."

The Relay for Life is held throughout the U.S. Locally, it was in Centreville from 2008-11; and this year's eighth annual event will be held for the fourth time at the nZone, 14550 Lee Road in Chantilly. It's set for Saturday, June 6, from 2 p.m.-midnight. For more information, to donate or participate, go to www.RelayForLife.org/ChantillyVA.

So far, 16 teams are signed up, but the organizers hope to eventually have 21 teams total. Reston's Mary Saunders is the community manager for the Chantilly event, and Little Rocky Run's Marion Rantis is its co-leader with Larry Goldberg.

"People can join an existing team or form one of their own," said Hamm. "And any number of team members is fine. It's a walking event, and the goal is to have at least one person from each team doing a lap at all times."

And, said Rantis, "Each team has a campsite where they can hang out, rest and socialize when they're not walking." This year's theme is "Lights, Camera, Cure" so, she said, "There'll be movie-themed decorations and trivia games, plus movie-themed laps where people will walk dressed as movie stars."

And as cancer survivors enter a special reception for them and their caregivers, said Saunders, "A Girl Scout troop will take their photos like paparazzi." Hamm will be the reception's guest speaker, talking about her own experiences. Ford's Fish Shack and Rosemary's Thyme Bistro are donating the food, with the Girl Scouts providing cookies.

But the event includes more than the walk and reception. It also features vendors, food and children's activities, plus a luminaria ceremony, and everyone is welcome.

"We'd love people to just come out and see this event — check it out," said Rantis. "And attendees' food-purchase proceeds and anything they buy from the teams that day goes toward the fundraising, too. We hope to raise \$60,000 at this event."

There's no registration fee, but the money comes from the fundraisers each team or individual does. They include things such as car washes, emails to friends and families, restaurant fundraisers and silent auctions.

"And our event gets fundraising credit through Aug. 31," added Rantis. "So people can still hold fundraisers and make donations to the event via the Website through August." Or to volunteer, email ChantillyRelay@gmail.com.

Hear 2 Heart Catering will offer sandwiches and snacks in the afternoon, and El Fresco will offer food such as bowls and tacos from 4:30-7:30 p.m. And after the luminaria ceremony, New Life Christian Church will sponsor a concession stand. Throughout the day, popcorn and snow cones will be available in the children's area. The church is also sponsoring the children's activities, including moonbounces, carnival games, Legos and crafts.

Westfield High choral students will sing the National Anthem to begin the 2 p.m. opening ceremony in the main gym. Keynote speaker is Fair Lakes resident BethAnn Telford. She's particularly inspirational because — while battling brain cancer, herself — she participates in marathons and endurance events to raise money for others, especially children, who also have brain cancer.

Next will come the survivor/caregiver reception and music by the New Life band. Then various contests and activities will occur while the walkers are doing their laps. There'll be a musical chairs scavenger hunt, judging for the most creatively decorated campsite and music by the Rapid Fire Radio Band (formerly called Flock of Eagles and comprised of Centreville Elementary staff members).

Also on tap are a Zumba demonstration, a talent show and a Minute to Win It game, as well as a cake walk and a show-tunes performance by the McLean Community Players. In addition, participants will compete in "Project Relay Runway," during which they must design a red-carpet-ready outfit using only duct tape, newspaper and scissors.

But perhaps the most memorable part of each Relay for Life is the luminaria ceremony. "It's where we honor the survivors and the memory of those who've passed, and it's very moving," said Hamm. It includes a slide show of people's loved ones called "Cancer Has a Face."

"Hundreds of luminaria bags are set around the gym," said Rantis. "Each has the name of someone who's had or has cancer, and we turn off the lights and the candles inside the bags are lit. A bagpiper plays as we walk around the bags several times, contemplating our loved ones, sometimes pausing to cry."

Saunders said it's "so striking to see the number of bags because there are also some for people who have cancer, but can't attend."

People can buy bags, even that day, in honor of their loved ones and can decorate them any way they want. They may even place notes under the bags, if they'd like.

"We also have the word 'Hope' spelled out on a back wall with the luminaria bags," said Rantis. "And while people are walking, they're changed into the word, 'Cure,' to illustrate our goal."

Hamm's team is called Still Alive & Kickin,' and Rantis and Saunders are on team For Our Future. Rantis started doing the relay in 2009. "It was 20 years since my mother died of cancer, and I wanted to do something in her memory," she said.

Noting that Relay for Life is the American Cancer Society's biggest fundraiser, Saunders said Dr. Gordon Klatt started it in 1985 to make people more aware of cancer. "Now there are 5,000 relays across the U.S. each year and we're in 20 countries," she said. "The money raised goes toward research grants, educational and patient services, plus Hope Lodge which provides free lodging near hospitals for cancer patients and their families."

Her favorite part is the luminaria ceremony. "You're hugging people you don't even know and crying with friends, family and cancer survivors," said Saunders. "And the bagpipe music makes it so poignant."

For Rantis, it's the people she's met through Relay for Life. "It's community-based, and these people inspire you when you hear about their cancer struggles and see them giving back at the event; it's very meaningful."

Hamm said the speakers have had a "huge impact on me and my husband. They make you feel like you're not alone. They're real people; and you feel, if they can do it, you can do it."

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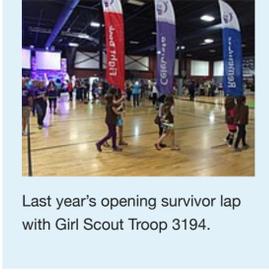
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Photo by Bonnie Hobbs
From left are Erin Hamm, Marion Rantis and Mary Saunders.



Last year's opening survivor lap with Girl Scout Troop 3194.

"You're hugging people you don't even know and crying with friends, family and cancer survivors."
- Mary Saunders