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Variety of Relay for Life participants shows cancer's reach

LOLA SHERMAN Seaside Musings

Tina Ortiz walked in her first Relay for Life providing funds for the fight against cancer 13 years ago. Her husband had died of [colon cancer](#) in 2001.

Ortiz, an [Oceanside](#) native and lifelong resident, chaired the entire 24-hour relay event last weekend at MiraCosta College. More than 50 teams made up of caregivers, survivors and supporters in general walked the college track most of the day and night.

About three dozen or so survivors got up on the stage at the opening ceremonies to give their names, the type of cancer they suffered and the amount of time they have survived the dreaded disease.

Due to a temporary failure in the portable electrical system, it was hard to hear some of the stories.

The longest survivor appeared to be longtime Oceanside activist Nadine Scott, who reported she had had kidney cancer 36 years ago. Retired Oceanside City Clerk Barbara Wayne said she had survived for 12 years.

And the most-recent cancer victims said they were still fighting it, some stating they are undergoing chemotherapy at present.

The track infield — once upon a time a football field when MiraCosta played the sport (canceled in 1985, but an old scoreboard still hides in the bushes) — hosted tents and canopies as groups set up to be there around the clock.

Opening ceremonies began at 10 a.m. Saturday, and the event closed at 10 a.m. Sunday.

Activities began even before the official opening with entertainment by disc jockey Nelson Mejia and then the welcome by Tommy Head.

Miss Oceanside Maggie Islas helped onstage, and her court was in the audience.

The expected chaplain wasn't able to come, so caregiver Debbie Odash asked if she could give an invocation. Seated with Odash was her 12-year-old granddaughter, Jordan Butler, wearing a bright pink T-shirt stating "my Mom is a cancer survivor."

Mayor Jim Wood spoke on behalf of the city, stating he had lost a sister to cancer at the age of 40, and the disease has affected "a lot of people, a lot of friends."

George McNeil, board president, spoke on behalf of the college. "Frankly," McNeil said, "we're honored that you chose MiraCosta" for the event. It is MiraCosta Community College, he said, emphasizing the word "community." "We support this event," he said. "We have for years."

Also present were Councilman Jerry Kern and college trustee William Fischer.

Not speaking at the official presentations, but participating quietly by running around the track was Alketa Wojcik, the college's vice president of student services.

Kim Lee introduced "a record-breaking number of sponsors (36-plus) this year."

Lee noted that Genentech, the No. 1 sponsor, held a golf tournament with all proceeds going to the Relay for Life.

Virginia Haaland, assistant director of human relations at Genentech, an Oceanside pharmaceutical company that produces cancer-fighting drugs, spoke on behalf of the firm's efforts in the field.

Later activities ran the gamut from a bounce house for the youngsters to performances by the New Horizon Band and the Ta'utiare Polynesian Dance Group.

Foods available varied from street tacos to chicken sandwiches to cupcakes.

Makeup artists and materials were on hand to demonstrate, for instance, how to handle the absence of eyebrows due to cancer treatments.

In the evening, luminarias (candles set in sand inside paper bags) illuminated the track.

Ortiz said the local event "has become one of the largest relays in San Diego County." And she displayed a banner showing that the Oceanside relay has received one of the first "Pacesetter Awards" from the Cancer Society.

And then she displayed another banner — one she and her adult daughter, Brianna, left fatherless at the age of 9 when Ortiz's husband died, had made.

It contained a graph to show the goal of reaching \$145,000 in funds raised. About \$10,000 more was needed. Ortiz said she was sure it would be raised during the weekend.

On Tuesday, she reported a total of \$155,288 had been contributed.