

# Reflecting on cancer: Relay for Life



I try not to think about cancer. After all the time I've spent standing helpless on the sidelines watching good people fight a vicious, faceless force from the inside out, I try not to let my mind collapse under the weight of painful memories and recurring images of human suffering.

In winter of 2015, one of my fourth grade students was battling brain cancer, while my godmother, Bonnie, was battling breast cancer. I had to do something, but I wasn't an oncologist, so what could I do?

Around this time, former St. Joan of Arc teacher Darla Wallace and current SJA parent Christina Kennedy asked me to join their Relay for Life team, the St. Joan of Arc Holy Walkamolies. I agreed.

I did a little bit of fundraising and recruiting for the event, which would be held on Friday, June 5, 2015 at the Havre de Grace High School track. One of the biggest features of the event was the circle of luminarias made of decorated white paper bags, which would be ceremoniously lit to honor cancer survivors and those who fought hard, but just couldn't win.

My mom and I purchased four bags for three generations of women who faced cancer: my grandmother Lillian, my aunt Anne, and her two daughters, Nancy and Bonnie. Aunt Anne and Bonnie's luminarias were designed to honor their victory and continued fight. My grandmother and beloved cousin and best friend Nancy's luminarias were devoted to their memory. I stuck some of my favorite photographs to each bag with pictures I printed onto giant labels. Seeing my courageous loved ones' names and faces was a reminder of why this event was so important.

When June 5th finally came around, the gloomy skies cleared just in time for the opening ceremonies. Survivors were honored, especially my 4th grader, who was able to cut the ribbon to kick off the night-long celebration of those men, women, and children who have faced the trial of a cancer diagnosis.



Despite the heavy weight of the event, the environment was light and festive. Food trucks and vendors peddled their wares to happy customers. People in silly clown costumes with elaborately decorated campsites emphasized the “Cirque de Relay” theme. Spirits were high as walkers lapped the track in team t-shirts and teens played Frisbee and football on the field.

There were ribbons of every shade of the rainbow everywhere I looked and enough luminarias to encompass the entire football stadium. I was surrounded by names, dates, and photos on t-shirts, signs, and white paper bags. At times I felt like I was observing headstones in a cemetery. “Why so many people?” I asked God. “Why is there no cure?”

When the sun set a little after 8, a woman shared the tragic story (she called it a fairy tale) of her family’s cancer fight, when her husband, son, and toddler granddaughter were all battling various forms of the disease at once. But, she was grateful to God for the small windows of remission and breaks from surgery that He gave her to enable her to stay strong emotionally for her loved ones. The tragedy is that her granddaughter lost the fight. The miracle is that her husband remains free of pancreatic cancer nine years later.

Her story reminded me of my own. How God took Nancy from me, but gave me Collin, and gave us time to be moms together. How my Aunt Anne is a gift to my family because she keeps us all together when times are tough, just as her mother Lillian did. And how Bonnie’s positive attitude and commitment to Christ and her family have shown me all the armor a person needs to face any battle.

When the luminarias were all lit, the place went silent. We walked around the track as one unit brought together by the worst of circumstances, making the unanimous decision to take our heartache and turn it back into love.



Mrs. Wallace found Collin near our luminarias, rubbing his fingers across the bag, talking to the people in the pictures. He only had memories of two of them, but he felt connected to them all. “These are my guys,” he told her.

On the way home, I asked Collin if he knew why we were there. (Earlier in the night he thought it was a race and took off at top speed in the opposite direction that our teams were walking). I explained to him that we were celebrating the lives of people who had a disease called cancer, which turns the good parts of your body bad. I told him about some of the people we know who had cancer, including Nancy.

I don't usually like to talk about her. It makes my chest hurt. It makes it hard to breathe. It makes it hard to talk. It's a lot like having a heart attack, I guess. But, I told Collin that if he had any questions about her, I'd be happy to answer them.

He did. He wanted to know if we liked to go places together, if she liked to play games, and if she had a car. I laughed while I told him stories and realized that it made me feel good to remember her. It was like she never left.

When we got home (very, very late, I might add), Collin woke Patrick up and told him, "Every bag was for someone we miss."

Thinking about cancer isn't easy. In fact, it's downright painful. But, it's important to consider the effect such a devastating disease has on its victims and their loved ones so that their fight is not forgotten. Thank you to Relay for Life for offering us the opportunity to reflect.

