

Still in the fight for life

July 24, 2019



Cancer survivors — still in the fight — and their supporters took a victory lap this past weekend at the 2019 “Relay for Life” at Del Norte High School in Crescent City.

Sunny Valero

Sunny Valero was one of them. She’s lived in the community for nearly 20 years and works as the human resources administrator for the City of Crescent City.

Valero was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma when she was 18 years old, before she moved here. The cancer came out of nowhere to disrupt her life.

Symptoms of itching and mysterious pain were initially thought to be walking pneumonia. Further investigation led to a biopsy that revealed she had a large tumor. A grapefruit-sized tumor had developed in her chest and was compressing her lung, making it difficult to breathe.

With no choice but to put her life on hold, Valero's battle against cancer began with eight months of extensive chemotherapy, and daily radiation treatments for six to eight weeks.

The treatments brought down the tumor, but Valero lost her hair and had to remain isolated to reduce the risk to her immune system compromised by the chemotherapy. Her defenses were so weakened that despite having been vaccinated, she contracted chickenpox at a Green Day concert she attended during a window of good health.

Valero credits her support system for helping her make it through. She said that while some friendships dissipated under the heavy weight of her diagnosis, others grew much stronger, revealing her true friends.

"When you're going through something like that, you really do see who's there and who you can depend on," Valero said.

Limited in what she could do, Valero's mother suggested she connect with the American Cancer Society for an opportunity to volunteer. Soon after, she found herself assembling and distributing information packets for families who needed to know more about the different types of cancers and treatments.

She also helped women who had lost their hair to find wigs from local salons and related organizations, although she herself found wigs uncomfortable and decided to forego them.

"Some ladies really, really wanted them, and understandably so," she said. "To have your hair come out all at one time is traumatizing."

Valero fought the cancer for a year. While she feels fortunate to have undergone a shorter battle than some have had, her health struggles continued. Doctors found numerous other concerns in treating her cancer.

She said she also suffers from treatment side effects such as a heart murmur. One chemo drug caused her to lose sensation in the tips of her fingers and toes. Her teeth and memory were affected.

"There's the after effects that you live with forever," Valero said. "The cancer is gone, but the residual effects of the chemo are still there."

Valero had participated in "Relay for Life" a number of years ago; this year, she decided it was time to get back into the event. With a late start, she said her team wasn't very big, but plans for a stronger showing in 2020.

Giving back to the American Cancer Society was a large part of her motivation. The organization touched her family with its kindness, she said, and they help so many people that she needs to get the word out.

"I want to be helpful wherever I'm needed, because the Cancer Society helped my family," she said. "When I was sick, they paid for my sister to get a bus ticket to come help give my mom some relief."

"Relay for Life" began in 1985 when Dr. Gordon Klatt walked and ran for 24 hours around a track in Tacoma, Washington, raising money to help the American Cancer Society.

For 24 hours, Klatt circled the track at the University of Puget Sound. Friends, family and patients watched and supported him as he walked and ran more than 83 miles, raising \$27,000 through pledges to help save lives from cancer.

As he circled the track, he reportedly thought of how he could get more people involved. Klatt envisioned teams participating in a 24-hour fundraising event. The next year, 19 teams were part of the first “Relay for Life” at the historical Stadium Bowl, raising \$33,000.

After previously battling stomach cancer, Klatt died of heart failure in 2014 at age 71.

Money is raised during nationwide “Relay for Life” activities such as a dunk tank and a silent auction, as well as through the efforts of individuals and teams who take on numerous fundraising approaches before and during the event.

The relay begins with a survivors’ lap, followed by the survivors’ dinner.

Perhaps the most touching aspect of the event is the “Luminaria” ceremony, designed to remember those lost to cancer and to celebrate the survivors. The ceremony shows everyone affected by the disease that there’s light in the darkness.

This year’s Crescent City “Relay for Life” was set to feature a special ceremony at midnight, “The Spirit of Relay,” recognizing participants and teams who were encouraged to keep fighting through the night. A dunk tank featuring local officials also was planned.

“We try to keep it fun and upbeat,” Valero said.

She said she’s doing well now. She has a busy life despite lingering health issues.

She said the experience has taught her that each person’s walk with cancer is different, and that talking about what you’re going through helps.

Valero continues to fight the good fight for those who are no longer able.

“I’m a survivor,” she said. “I’m not a victim to cancer.”

Stretch Mann

Stretch Mann also participated in Crescent City’s “Relay for Life” event. He only recently pulled ahead in his race against cancer, having had a clean bill of health for only a month or so prior to the relay. He is still under a watchful medical eye.

Mann graduated from high school in 1982 and left the area to work on the East Coast. When his mother’s health took a turn for the worse in 2005, he returned, cleaning out his 401k plan to make that possible. She passed away a few years ago.

In 2017, Mann found a lump on his neck and had it checked out by ultrasound. It appeared at first to be a cyst, nothing to worry about, but a few months later two more lumps appeared.

He insisted his doctor take another look, receiving an ultrasound/biopsy that in April 2018 confirmed he had metastatic squamous cell carcinoma — lymph-node cancer.

The fight was on.

“Right after that, boy, they just started pulling teeth ... I had five or six teeth pulled,” he said. “I had to go have a PET scan done. I had to have a port put in for my chemo. I had to have a feeding tube put in for food ... all this was in, like, three months.”

Surgery was required to find where the cancer had begun, in the back of his nasopharynx, before it attacked his lymph nodes. Then, it was five days a week of radiation, with chemotherapy every 21 days.

Mann said attending the six-hour chemotherapy sessions over the course of four months would have been impossible without the American Cancer Society, “Relay for Life,” and St. Joseph Hospital in Eureka. They put him up in an apartment on the hospital grounds for the treatment’s duration.

“Just driving back and forth five days a week from Eureka to Crescent City, then back again the next morning to have the treatments, we could not have done it,” he said.

Mann said he would feel good while receiving chemotherapy, but three or four days later he would suffer fevers, nausea and exhaustion.

That’s why a caregiver is crucial for somebody fighting cancer, he said, adding that nutritional drinks supplied to him by the American Cancer Society have been essential to his recovery, particularly on days when his appetite is down.

Mann said the doctors like what they’re seeing from his cancer treatment, but they’re concerned about his kidney health.

He was hospitalized twice because of the cancer. The first time it was just a few days, but stage-three kidney failure prompted a nearly two-week stay.

Cancer treatments left him ravaged by oral thrush (open sores in the mouth), he was anemic, and badly dehydrated. Standing nearly 7 feet tall, Mann was down to under 130 pounds.

He’s starting to gain his weight back a little at a time, he said, but Mann isn’t out of the woods. Doctors will observe him closely; another endoscopic examination is needed.

Should that go well, Mann will have six months free and clear, a real milestone after his fight. Keeping his kidneys healthy will be a top priority. He joked that what saved him, nearly killed him.

While’s he not yet feeling 100 percent, Mann said, participating in “Relay for Life” was important because he doesn’t want to sit at home feeling sorry for himself. He wants to get out and promote cancer awareness.

This past Fourth of July, a day after chemotherapy and radiation, Mann proved the importance of that awareness by riding his horse in the town parade, with a couple of pals to keep him safe.

“If I can bring awareness of cancer and how severe it is ... and you don’t have choice ... you don’t get to pick or choose whether you have cancer or not,” he said. “It picks you.

“And not only does it affect you as a victim, it affects your whole family. My whole family’s life has been changed.”

Added Mann, “If I can go out and help save a life, or bring awareness so people will donate to a great cause like this ... When you donate to the American Cancer Society, not only are you donating to save lives, you’re saving the life of a child, you’re saving the life of somebody who needs a kidney, you’re saving the life of somebody you don’t know,” he said.

“You’re making a change in their life,” Mann said.