

Springing into SERVICE

Relay for Life and the Spring Blood Drive have a lasting impact on the Richland Northeast community

by CASEY COLLINS and LINA SALEH

At nine o'clock on a Saturday evening, the Richland Northeast High School football field is submerged in silence. No voices call out, and no one attempts to whisper quietly. The muffled shuffling of hundreds of footsteps echoes against the track surface as attendants make their way around the field. The tall lights that usually set the field aglow are turned off, and everything is left in darkness. In this moment of utter stillness, the school is illuminated by the tiny lights of paper lanterns, lit in memory of those who have passed and in honor of those who have survived.

Cancer is one disease that has run through the veins of the Cavalier family, including two current teachers. Betsy Kinsella and Kathleen Druzba were diagnosed with breast and ovarian cancer respectively around the same time back in 2016. While these diagnoses caused no small amount of grief for these two women and their loved ones, they proved to be instrumental in fostering Northeast's investment in supporting cancer patients, survivors, and family members. This investment materialized itself this spring through Northeast hosting a Relay for Life event for the surrounding community.

"I think it's really good for us to have Relay for Life so that kids who aren't exposed to this kind of stuff get to understand the importance of cancer and how it impacts other people," junior John Jeffery commented. "It's close to home, rather than hearing about it on the news or with distant friends or family members."

Relay for Life is a community centered fundraiser for cancer research run under the American Cancer Society. However, this year, students like Jeffery were able to connect to the fundraiser more closely due to the school community's relationship with cancer, making the event more impactful than before.

"My favorite part has been the dance things they have done because it has been really fun to see everybody get together and be hype," junior Rashonda Reeves said. While Relay for Life can be an incredibly fun event, with dancing, games, blasting music, and other activities, Reeves acknowledged that students should remember the true purpose of the event. "It's raising money for the cause, because...Relay for Life donates all of their money to cancer patients and that's what the whole point is, so that's great."

It can be a dramatic shift when transitioning from the spirited chaos of the afternoon to the more somber, reflective mood of the evening. But as the lights dimmed and the crowd in front of the stage, all eyes turned to Kinsella, her voice setting the evening's solemn tone by reading Druzba's written account of her experience with cancer.

"A student of mine, I call Rose, helped me write the begin-

From left to right, senior Andrew Chang and juniors Kevin Cao and Annie Kim enjoy the competition for "Miss Relay."



De'Viannah Perkins

ning of this speech," Kinsella said to begin Druzba's statement. "She wrote, 'The beauty in life isn't in the now, or even in the future. The beauty is in the struggle and triumph of the losses we endure.'"

This message rang true throughout the entire night, and an understanding of these words washed over the audience's faces, based largely on a collection of personal experiences and a shared interest in the well-being of a member of the community. This understanding was then deepened when Druzba continued by writing, "For my entire life, cancer was never real to me. The first time cancer was real to me was when my sweet mom said she had breast cancer. It was November of 2015."

For several members of the Northeast community who attended the event, this relationship with cancer touched close to home as they, like Druzba, also watched parental figures suffer through the disease.

"My first experience with cancer was through my grandfather, who I was very close to," English teacher Stephanie Stone said. "A few years ago, he passed away from lung cancer, and it was very sudden. Then, in September, my dad got diagnosed with prostate cancer, so he has been fighting it since then and is now in remission and is a survivor, so cancer is very close to me."

This familial connection spurred Stone to agree to be the fundraising chair for the event, and to be so involved in planning and participating in Relay for Life on Northeast's campus. It also provided her with an opportunity to teach her students the importance of community service.

"I want to share with them how great an organization this is and how good it feels to give back to people, and to do something that matters, because one day they may need help and they may have cancer or someone may be affected," Stone said.

Similarly to Stone, English teacher Margot Jeffers lost two grandfathers, as well as her father, to lung, stomach, and prostate cancer. This disease, and the lack of public awareness that accompanied it at the time when they passed, is what has

pushed Jeffers to support causes such as Relay for Life.

"When they passed away, I don't think there was a lot of attention or publicity about cancer and really trying to end it, so now, with efforts such as Relay for Life, there's more publicity about



RNE teacher Kathleen Druzba, right, walks hand-in-hand with a fellow cancer survivor during the survivors' lap to kick off Relay for Life.

the disease and more effort to really try to stamp it out," Jeffers said. "So, naturally, I want to try to help what I couldn't help with them by paying it forward, especially participating both financially and with my time to help those who are fighting now or who will fight in the future."

For Druzba, a notable part of her survival story was defined by the thought, "What do you say to someone who tells you they have cancer?" During her diagnosis and treatment, what people both did and did not say made a unique difference on her journey with cancer.

"Mrs. Rhoden was in a meeting with Dr. Suber when I walked back into their office," Druzba wrote. "It was then and there that I told them both at the same time, and they listened, and we started to cry. You see, you don't need to say anything -- you simply listen. I realize now how important it is to tell people. You shouldn't fight cancer battles alone."

Although Druzba did not feel well enough to present her speech at the event, members of the audience may remember her message resonating across the football field in Kinsella's voice. With themes of light and darkness, strength and suffering, and community and healing, Druzba gave a voice and connection to the ever-elusive idea of high school students helping in the fight to prevent and cure cancer.

"Life is a teacher, and love is the reward in all forms," Druzba began to conclude. "No way would I have been able to get through this time without the love and support that I have had from all of you. These moments were scary and incredibly beautiful, all at the same time... Thank you for coming together as a family, and for helping make our school, our school district, and our community stronger."



Photographs of Relay for Life were contributed by Kate Baker, Casey Collins, Kelly Lifchez and De'Viannah Perkins.