Three Words Relay For Life 2019 Means to a Cancer Survivor

I walk away from Relay For Life with three words that define my experience.

May 8, 2019 By Justin Birckbichler

After a great experience with Relay for Life 2018, I decided to make another appearance this year, which occurred this past Saturday. I decided to attend as a cancer survivor and focus on connecting with other survivors, rather than being a team captain again.

Last year, I found three lessons from Relay For Life: celebrate cancer survivors, fight back against cancer, and remember the fallen. This year, three words resonated with me as I spoke with other survivors, patients, and caregivers: Stories, Hope, and Journey.

Relay for Life means “Stories”

The first lap of Relay for Life consists of all cancer survivors walking together to kick off the day. This year, I happened to get to hold the banner that announced us as cancer survivors, which I am choosing to believe has more to do with the fact that I’m just such a ballsy individual… instead of having a last name in the beginning of the alphabet.

While walking with two other awesome people (who also happened to have A or B last names), we shared our stories. One woman had faced three separate cancers over twenty years, but was fortunate enough to never require any treatment beyond surgeries. I called her an overachiever, since one cancer was enough for me. She turned my words right around on me by noting that I was actually the overachiever since I ran the chemotherapy gauntlet. This light-hearted take on our respective stories helped set my day off on a good foot — literally.

Another favorite part of Relay for Life is the Survivor and Caregiver Luncheon. This is a time and space to connect with other people who just inherently “get it,” in a way people who still have all their body parts and non-mutated genes can’t. The BBQ feast is just an awesome — and delicious — bonus.

Over pulled pork, cole slaw, and potato salad, I had a conversation with a breast cancer survivor. While listening to her, I couldn’t help but draw parallels between our stories. We were both diagnosed at what we thought was “too young” for cancer and our stories progressed quickly once discovering a lump. Both of our initial diagnoses and surgeries occurred within a span of less than one month in the fall. Though we had never met before, we had a common thread woven through

our similar stories.

The power of a shared story is a thread can can bind cancer survivors, patients, and caregivers together without any visible commonalities.

The event provides “Hope”

This year’s theme for Relay for Life was Star Wars, which was fitting since it took place on May Fourth AKA “May the Fourth Be With You.” The first (or fourth or sixth, depending how you look at it with the prequel trilogy, Solo, and Rogue One) movie in the Star Wars series was subtitled “A New Hope.” Fittingly, the word “Hope” was chosen as the theme for the day, most clearly illustrated by a large sign that spelled out the letters in bold print a la the LOVE sign in Philly.

But it’s more than just the sign that made hope come alive. Within my “campsite,” there was a woman whose husband is currently fighting testicular cancer. We had an opportunity to speak a little and I shared my experience with her. While it sounded like his stage was more advanced than mine, I offered to help however I could and gave her my contact information. As we parted ways, I saw A New Hope gleaming within her eyes. I’m sure countless more of these interactions occurred as friends, family, and community members walked together and shared why they chose to come out to the track.

While cancer is a scary word, the more powerful word of “Hope” can wipe out the Dark Side of this disease.

Relay for Life means “Journey”

I’ve often struggled with which word to describe my trials with cancer. At times, I use story, sometimes I use experiences, but I generally revert to using the word “Journey.” I’m never sure if that’s the right word to use because it reminds me too much of the Oregon Trail — and I don’t know if people even get dysentery anymore.

During the aforementioned lunch, I spoke with another survivor who faced cancer back in the 1990s, when I was just a wee lad with two balls. He shared how he’s made it a point to attend at least one Relay for Life every year since then since he knows how important they are to the cancer community. He also told me that one of his best memories from cancer (which is an odd turn of phrase) is when he was told by his doctor that he “didn’t have to come back anymore” since it had been so long since his diagnosis. I look forward to the day that my journey reaches that point.

As we parted ways, his wife said, “Good luck on your journey — because that’s what it is. Each day is something new and you never know what you’ll get.” To hear another person so closely affected by cancer refer to it as a journey shows me that I might be onto something.

Cancer can best be described as a journey, with all of its ups and downs, though luckily we don’t need to try to fjord a river unlike the intrepid travelers on the Oregon Trail.

Final thoughts

Relay for Life is truly an amazing experience. While I didn't stay for the entire day like I did last year, I'll have these memories and more (such as a bouncy house race) to keep me inspired and ready for next year.

Last year, I closed out the post by saying I wanted to take a more active role on the Survivor and Caregiver Team. However, I totally dropped the ball on it this year, but I've already spoken with the chair about doing it for the 2020 season.

The most important thing to remember isn't about the steps taken, the laps completed, the money raised, or the total number of attendees. It's about remembering why we do this:

Sharing Stories of those affected by cancer

Providing Hope for those who need it most

Honoring the Journey of those touched by cancer

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