

RACE

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Southwest Florida affiliate of Susan G. Komen for the Cure, the nationwide nonprofit with a singular goal: to prevent and find a cure for this most personal of diseases.

For men, an apt comparison might be testicular cancer. Breast cancer wreaks havoc not just on a body part, but on an identity. The hair loss and weight gain that often accompany chemotherapy treatments underline the emotional degradation that survivors face.

"It's very personal — that's what makes this organization strong," said Stefan Strickland, national director of affiliates, Susan G. Komen for the Cure. "It really started with a promise (to find a cure) — that promise to me is what creates a bond in the community. We make a promise to our mothers, daughters and wives."

The nonprofit's strength also comes from spending 75 percent of its profit locally, Ms. Strickland adds, for education and to help provide regular mammograms and breast cancer treatment for the uninsured. People see firsthand how it helps the community," she says.

Ready, set, go!

The Southwest Florida affiliate of Komen, one of 120 nationwide, hosted the organization's flagship event, Race for the Cure, three years ago for the first time. In spite of the economic downturn, the race has doubled in size and sponsorship since then.

Last month, more than 8,300 joggers, walkers and runners turned out for the race at Coconut Point. The event raised \$81,000. Southwest Florida's Komen affiliate also pulled in \$821,640 in grants this year, from Lee Memorial Health System, Naples Community Hospital, Florida Gulf Coast University and other sponsors.

"When one of our affiliates starts hosting the race, we see tremendous growth" of support in that community, Ms. Strickland says. "I have to give great props to the affiliate in Southwest Florida. They did so much work."

On race days in towns across America, the Komen image is reflected by a "sea of pink." It's found in women like Ms. Oluwek, a Naples preschool teacher who donned a pink cowboy hat for the race this year, where thousands of survivors were honored.

But who is this Susan G. Komen? And why is her pink theme seemingly everywhere — in department stores, grocery stores and schools, on the T-shirts of joggers?

She died from breast cancer 27 years ago, and her sister started the organization, promising that it wouldn't end until a cure was found. Like other historical and cultural legends, her name has taken on meaning for millions.

"Susan G. Komen has a great deal to do with all these lives being saved," says Mariann MacDonald, a 15-year survivor and co-chair of the race the last two years. "Twenty-five years ago, people didn't talk about breast cancer. People were embarrassed. Now, everyone talks about it. They know. Now you have to get a mammogram. It's the reason people like me are still around. And I'm going to be a grandmother."

Here are the stories of four others in Southwest Florida who have taken up Ms. Komen's cause, as told in their own words.



>>Clara Verhaagh, 51,

has taught sixth-grade math at Bonita Springs Middle School for 30 years and is battling breast cancer for the fourth time. She organized a team from her school for this year's Race for the Cure.



JIM MACLAUGHLIN/FLORIDA WEEKLY

The post-race crowd floods the streets of the Coconut Point shopping district.



COURTESY PHOTO

Clara Verhaagh

In 2001, I had to fly to Boston to Massachusetts General (Hospital) and have part of my sternum taken out. So I did that and came home and had chemo and radiation — and I kept teaching.

I need to keep busy, and if I can (keep teaching), why not do it? What would I do at home? Sit around and watch TV? I love teaching. I mean I love teaching. I was very fortunate that third time in 2001... I would be particularly tired the Mondays and Tuesdays after chemo, which I had every three weeks. A retired teacher would take my Mondays and Tuesdays, so I wouldn't lose my sick days. Those two days were the toughest days, the third time I had cancer.

This time was a real shock. It was right before lunch when I stretched, and under my arm it hurt. It was on a Thursday, and my son was graduating from college the following Saturday. I called my doctor and said I'm going to Tampa for my son Mitchell's graduation and asked him, 'Can I come in on my way out of town?' So I went in and had it tested and had a biopsy and bingo, it was cancer.

I've already finished my radiation, 30 treatments... chemo will probably start in about three weeks.

All it is is just another little kink. Really and truly, people can get in bed and cry. You can pout about it, kick and scream and cry about it, but it's better just to deal with it and work around it. I'm not going to tell you that I don't break down every once in a while and cry, but I'll cry and dry my tears and just go on. I'm not gonna let it beat me.

When I cry, it's not that I'm afraid, it's that I'm tired. I've never been afraid. To be honest with you, I trust God and I trust my doctors. I've done everything that I was told that I should do. I've never second-guessed that maybe I should have done this or done that. I'm not that type of a person.

Luckily, it's going into summer time. I still have another month and a half left of school, but the majority of treatment will be during the summer. It will be the typical symptoms: hair loss, fatigue, nausea. It's doable. It's better than the alternative. I just hope everything will be fine and I won't have to worry about it anymore. But I don't worry about what I'm going to do if it's going to happen again.

I never would have dreamed that this would happen four times.

Being 11 or 12 (years old), (my students) are pretty excited to see me bald. I don't wear a wig or a hat. The wig is a pain... it's hot. I would wear a baseball cap the last time. My son and I were going to Target and I had thrown the hat in the back seat because I was hot. I grabbed the hat to put it on and Mitchell said, "Why?" He said, "Don't you think people can see through the windows that you have no hair. Don't you think people in Bonita Springs know you have cancer?" He said, "Let's go." And I went into Target bald as a cue ball. I went to school that way and it was such a good feeling. So now all my students are excited to see me with no hair."



>>Linda Oluwek, 48, is a

teacher at Shalom Preschool in Naples and a breast cancer survivor of 11 years. She was team captain of Ya Ya Sisters of Shalom Sisterhood in this year's race.



COURTESY PHOTO

Linda Oluwek

I didn't have any family history of breast cancer. I just had this feeling I needed to go through a mammogram. I'd just had a baby in April of 1997 and my doctor told me I shouldn't (have a mammogram) until six months after the baby was born. He also told me I was young, not to worry. But I just had this... call it intuition.

I was living in Philadelphia at the time. A surgeon looked at my mammo-

gram and did a biopsy, and the biopsy came back negative. He said, "Let's just remove what we're seeing." Lo and behold, I was in the surgery and they dissected this piece into very small pieces and they found a piece that was malignant in that lump.

So I was 37 years old and had just had a baby a month prior and my doctor felt that because I was young and strong I should go through chemo and fight this off.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I was sitting across the desk from the doctor. When he said, "You don't know how lucky you are," I got very upset with him. He told me, "One day you'll understand." In the 11 years I've been a survivor, I've seen people go through much more drastic scenarios as far as the extremities of their cancer, losing family members, doing much more radical treatments than I was going through. So I was sort of able to understand the theory of how lucky I was.

What I tell people now is to focus on something you can do at the end of your treatment, whether it's go see a show or plan a vacation, have something to look forward to. I knew my treatment was ending July 31 and I planned to do something in August. My family and I were coming to Florida; we had planned a vacation.

That year they had a Race for the Cure in Philadelphia on Mother's Day. It was very empowering to be a part of that just as a participant. That was in 1998. I moved to Florida in 2000 and became involved as a volunteer on West Palm Beach. That was before (Susan G. Komen for the Cure) finally came to Southwest Florida.

I didn't understand what my doctor meant by, "One day you'll understand this" until I was a team captain this year. We had some participants who had never done the race before. To hear their feelings and see how exceptional they felt made me realize I have come full circle in this disease.

I am now empowering women against this disease. Participating is really empowering. It's a women's way to gather and empower each other. Being able to do it with my children and my friends' children — it's like a life lesson that I'm passing on to them.

I was at the brunch they had the week before the race. I saw just how many women in that small room have been touched with what I've been touched with. The woman I remember most was the longest survivor, 33 years. I think about the kind of treatment then — how the degrees of treatment have changed, how the diagnoses are being made so much earlier. I have been clear of cancer for 11 years, but every day I'm learning something more.

For me now, I'm a single mom. I was denied health insurance by Blue Cross/Blue Shield and Humana. Avalon is just about to deny me. (Through Komen for the Cure), I was referred to Bosom Buddies for a mammogram. I'm very hesitant to (get a mammogram), even as a survivor, because if they should find anything, I would never get health insurance. And if I was diagnosed, I couldn't afford to get treatment. I'd go bankrupt and I'm raising three children. So I'm between a rock and a hard place.

But like my doctor said, "You're lucky." I'll never forget that. I am lucky. I'm still here. So I live each day one at a time. I'm appreciative of every day in Southwest Florida, and I'm healthy. That's really the bottom line. That's all that matters.



>>Tom Murphy, 43, has

been Race for the Cure director in Southwest Florida for three years and is past president of the Fort Myers Track Club. As owner of Holes Montes, a Naples-based land surveillance