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- Home
- News
- Opinion
- Dining
- Entertainment
- Classified
- Contact Us

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Volunteers rally for Relay for Life

By Andrea Lypka

SOUTH PASADENA - When several dozen volunteers joined together to fight cancer in the mid-1980s, little did they know that the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life event would become one of the largest fundraising events in the world. Since 2003, volunteers from the beach communities have participated in Relay for Life of Gulf Beaches to raise money for a cure. Twelve volunteers, three of them cancer survivors, were present at the Relay for Life early bird rally on Sept. 17 at Palms of Pasadena Hospital. They say they are ready to involve the community in their campaign against the disease.

Event Chair Debbie Luongo, a radiation therapist at Palms of Pasadena Hospital, says she has taken care of cancer patients for most of her life. She became involved with the American Cancer Society after hearing about the "Look Good...Feel Better" program. Now, Luongo teaches a class that helps patients feel better and improves their self-esteem.

"I love to help and I know most of the female patients," she said. "Often, these patients don't have a lot of support. It's a way I can help a lady smile and feel better about herself. And give her hope."

She became even more involved at the organization when cancer nearly claimed her sister.

"There would not be the advances we have today if it were not for the American Cancer Society. My heart is in it. My sister's life is on the line," she said. "I think we need to get out there and let the community know, because there are a lot of people who have cancer. Let's unite and beat this disease."

One of the volunteers, Misibindi Miller, is a breast cancer survivor. Her friends know her as "Mother Courage." She says she is the only survivor from a group of seven cancer patients who were diagnosed at the same time and treated at the same hospital. "I try to give back and just be thankful for every extra day I have. I feel loved and we are all on the same page and I hope we defeat cancer in my lifetime," Miller said. Her husband lost the battle against cancer in July.

This year, Miller is on the relay committee as the Luminaria Chair, along with her daughter, Hillary Miller. The Luminaria ceremony is a way to honor survivors and to remember those who have lost the battle against cancer.

Christine Hartman, community representative for the American Cancer Society, said the goal is to raise \$35,000 at the Relay for Life of Gulf Beaches. The event is a team event and they are asking the community to form teams comprised of family, friends, co-workers, community groups and schools.

"We want to keep the community involved and have fresh faces every year," Hartman said.

[Home](#) - [News](#) - [Opinion](#) - [Dining](#) - [Entertainment](#) - [Contact](#) - [Site Map](#)

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The Relay for Life of Gulf Beaches

will be held on April 16-17,
2010, on Treasure Island
beach. To sign up a team,
become an event sponsor or to
join the relay committee, send
e-mail to Christine Hartman at
christine.hartman@cancer.org
or call 727-812-7026. Visit the
official Relay For Life of Gulf
Beaches Web site for event
progress and more.

www.relayforlife.org/gulfbeachesfl