

Rockdale Citizen

Rockdale prepares for Relay for Life

Participants in 14-hour event raise money to fight cancer

By Jennifer Gibson

Staff Reporter

jennifer.gibson@newtoncitizen.com

CONYERS — People deal with tragedy in various personal ways. Some may withdraw from the world and seek refuge within themselves, while some may outwardly express their pain to anyone who will listen.

When Paige Kersh was dealt two severe blows in succession nearly seven years ago, he chose not to withdraw or cry out — he chose to fight back.

“I (fight) because my mom always told me every day she was sick that there would be a cure. A cure could come out tomorrow and she could be there,” he said. “She continued to fight, and this is my way of continuing the fight for her.”

Kersh lost his mother to cancer in 2000, and nearly a year after his mother died, cancer struck his family once again. Kersh’s 2-year-old daughter, Kylie, was diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a type of cancer that affects only about 650 people in the United States each year, according to the American Cancer Society.

“Her (tumor) sat between her aorta and her spinal cord,” he said. “She had seven surgeries in 17 days. They actually had to go in and put a patch on (the area) to stop spinal fluid from leaking out. The doctors said she wasn’t supposed to make it at all.”

Kylie defied her doctors’ dire predictions and is now an active and vivacious 8-year-old attending Honey Creek Elementary School.

“My daughter is considered cured,” Kersh said. “She’s 8 years old now and has no side effects of it or anything. She competes in everything — cheerleading, soccer, golf. Everything. It’s an absolute miracle.”

During Kylie’s illness, the Kersh family relied heavily on the support of their church and their friends, which Kersh said is largely what kept him and Kylie’s mother from falling apart. The family now wants to repay those who helped them through their struggle, and fight for those whose struggle is just beginning.

At least one member of the Kersh family team, Take a Club to Cancer, will be on the track all night at Friday’s 2007 Rockdale County Relay for Life event, sponsored by the American Cancer Society, at the Georgia International Horse Park, and several members of the community will be on the green May 18 for the “Take a Club to Cancer” golf tournament. Kersh said the tournament is his family’s

No. 1 priority when it comes to fundraising, and last year they raised nearly \$9,000 for Relay for Life. This year, he said they hope to raise at least \$15,000.

Kersh said most of the credit for the golf tournament should go to his daughter.

“(Joni) Howard has the Relay for Life team at Honey Creek, and last year they named the team and dedicated the proceeds to my daughter, and (Kylie) wanted to do something special to help raise money for the team,” he said. “I told her to think about it and she said, ‘Daddy, you always wanted to put together a golf tournament for Relay for Life.’ Now we have a tournament every year and donate all proceeds to Relay for Life.

“She just really cares about all this, and it makes me and her mom so happy to do the golf tournament,” he added. “(Kylie) realizes where she was and that a lot of people had helped us out, and she’s trying her best to try to return the help.”

Howard, who is the 2007 chairwoman of Rockdale County’s Relay for Life, said “Take a Club to Cancer” is just one of 72 teams registered to participate in this year’s event, which is an increase of more than 40 teams from last year. “That’s a record for Rockdale County,” she said. “We’ve had a strong showing from new teams this year. We got 100 percent participation from all Rockdale County schools. It’s just been fantastic.”

Howard said Rockdale Relay for Life is poised to break another of its records, as well. This year’s goal was to raise at least \$225,000, and Howard said that, as of Monday night, the total is close to \$200,000.

“Our goal is \$225,000. I want to beat that, and I think we will,” she said. “We will walk, rain or shine. We’re there no matter what. We’ve had years we thought we were going to blow away and the lightning was horrendous, but we stayed. That’s the motto: ‘Cancer never sleeps and neither do we.’ Rain or shine, we’re out there.”

Kersh said he believes in the motto, and that he will do whatever he can to keep cancer from striking again.

“It’s more than my daughter and mother,” he said. “My dad’s a cancer survivor. I lost a sister-in-law to cancer. My aunt is a cancer survivor. My wife’s grandparents lost their battles with cancer. This has all happened in a 5-year period, 2000 to 2005, and I’m sick of it.”

Howard said Relay for Life 2007 begins at 5 p.m. Friday and runs through 7 a.m. Saturday. Throughout the 14-hour time period, one person from each team will be walking, although there will be several different events. Two of the most important ones, she said, are the 7 p.m. survivors’ lap and the 9 p.m. luminaria service.

“(The survivors’ lap) is where survivors and caregivers walk the lap, and everybody cheers and encourages them,”

she said. "At the luminaria service, everybody is silent, candles are lit and we honor those who have passed. A lone bagpiper will walk the track playing 'Amazing Grace.'"

While there is a serious tone to the event, Howard said it is also about having fun and celebrating life.

"Our theme is 'Decades of Progress and Hope,' and we have entertainment based around the decades," she said.

"We have an Elvis impersonator, karaoke, line dancing.

Rockdale County youth are also involved in large numbers this year, she said.

"There will be several local school choruses. Salem (High School) is there. The (Rockdale County High School) choir will perform, and a local band from Heritage (High School) will perform," she said. "We really got the kids into it this year.

"I just want our survivors to come out and have a good time," she added. "This is what we do it for — it's for them."

The public is welcome, as well, to come out to the event, she said. Attendees don't have to be on a team in order to enjoy the evening, which will include food and other activities in addition to the entertainment.

For Kersh, the event is a reprieve in a tireless battle, a night to enjoy life along with everything they have worked so hard to accomplish.

"Sometimes, I think it's just been a horrible day, and my wife will say, 'You know, it could be a whole lot worse.'

And, you know, it could be. It has been," he said. "Cancer weighs you down so much. Just for a week or so I feel like I'm helping to beat cancer and I'm on top of it instead of it weighing down everybody else."

The 2007 Rockdale County Relay for Life will begin at

5 p.m. Friday and end at 7 a.m. Saturday at the Georgia International Horse Park, 1996 Centennial Olympic Parkway. Visit www.rockdalerelayforlife.org or e-mail Sharon Mason at sharon.mason@cancer.org for more information on the event.

Visit www.takeaclubtocancer.com for more information on the golf tournament.

