

Person of the Month reflects on Relay For Life

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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NM Cancer Center volunteer discusses landmark year

The Relay for Life of Gallup McKinley County will hold its twentieth run June 21, an occasion that is perhaps a bit more emotional than usual for one particular cancer survivor.

At least that is the impression one gets from Joyce Graves, a volunteer at New Mexico Cancer Center, and one of the top participants of the relay.

Graves was born in Texas and grew up in Oklahoma and Kansas. She is a three-time cancer survivor, who came to Ft. Defiance, Ariz. after teaching at College of the Muscogee Nation in Oklahoma.

The *Sun* spoke with Graves June 10 about what the relay means to her and what is planned for the event this year.

“It’s [the experience of] going there and having those feelings, seeing the survivors and how long they’ve lasted,” Graves said. “It’s a roller coaster of emotion.”

GETTING INVOLVED

Graves said when the event was first organized 20 years ago, she was asked by the event chair at the time if she would get involved. Graves said yes, and she eventually took over as event chair.

Since Relay for Life Gallup was started, the event has become the only relay in western New Mexico that goes into the night, Graves said.

“Gallup has become the go-to relay in this part of the state,” Graves said. “This makes us feel like we want to keep going.”

According to the Relay for Life website, Graves has currently raised over \$5,400 for the event.

This is in large part to the support of local businesses, according to Graves, and the continually growing support of the community.

“The [Business Improvement District] told me they have it on their calendar every year,” Graves said. “People are remembering this event every year.”

More importantly, the number of cancer survivors who show up to the relay has increased, Graves said. About 20 survivors showed up the first year, she said. But now, she said, anywhere from 60 to 110 survivors show up to one of the relays.

“There’s been a growth [in survivors who show up] in the last six years,” said Graves. “That growth in how many new survivors we get is consistent.”

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PLANS FOR THIS YEAR

Graves said this year's Relay for Life Gallup starts with an opening ceremony where cancer survivors are recognized.

This is followed by the survivor and caregiver walk, where survivors will get to take the first lap.

The event will conclude with the luminaria ceremony. The luminarias carry the name of a past or present cancer survivor and hold a message for them. People participating in the ceremony can dedicate their luminarias to anyone they like at the event or online.

Graves said Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez will participate and accept pledges for the event for every lap that he completes.

In addition, Luci Tapahonso, named the inaugural poet laureate of the Navajo Nation in 2013, will be present and reciting some of her poetry.

"We are recognizing the people who've been valuable to us through the years," Graves said.

PeeWee's Kitchen, which has provided the reception meal for Relay for Life Gallup for the past several years, will once again provide the food for the reception held sometime in August or September, she added.

As for the survivors themselves, Graves said this event will be an opportunity for them to look back and see how they've grown over the years.

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Graves added that the relay and the cancer center make it so that no one has to go through the chemotherapy treatment alone.

“These events let the survivors know, ‘I’m not alone,’” she said. “They now know that there is a support system after these events.”

IT’S ALL PERSONAL

When asked if there was a particular moment from her involvement with Relay for Life Gallup that stands out, Graves recalled the very first relay.

Graves said that as she stood up and saw the relay track with the participants and realized what was unfolding and why they were doing it, she understood the significance of the relay.

“This is what it’s all about,” she said. “We’re doing a marvelous thing for these people.”

Graves also spoke about how each survivor’s name is called at the relay.

She added that in previous years, the survivors would come to the ceremony stage when they were recognized, but once many more survivors began showing up, they were told to stand from the bleachers to be recognized.

While this made the process quicker, Graves said it also had an unexpected effect.

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“The survivors would come up to me later and say, ‘I missed your hugs,’ [because I didn’t go on the stage],” she said.

For more information on the event, call (505) 262-6023.

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Sun Correspondent