

Honorary chairs carry message of hope and courage

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Five area cancer survivors will lead the Lap of Hope on Friday, July 12, to kick off the 19th Annual American Cancer Society Relay For Life of Dawson County at Lake Helen in Gothenburg. They are Aleda Peterson of Gothenburg, Cherie Armagost of Cozad, Louise Dannehl of Lexington, Tina Gruntorad of Overton and Janelle Jack of Eustis.

“Our honorary chairpersons send a strong message of hope and courage to everyone who attends Relay For Life,” said Pam Ackerman, event chairperson, of Lexington. “They will lead all of the cancer survivors in the Lap of Hope. Survivors and their caregivers meet at the halfway point and finish the lap together.”

All survivors are welcome to participate in the first lap at 6 p.m. Registration is 4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. at the south shelter/restroom at Lake Helen Park in Gothenburg.

Aleda Peterson, Gothenburg

After four cancer diagnoses, Aleda Peterson of Gothenburg is living proof that early detection saves lives. The first diagnosis in 1988 was breast cancer. She had a mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiation. “I found the lump that first time,” she said. “I wanted to wait until my son graduated from college, but the doctor said we had to do it (surgery) right now and you’ll be back for graduation,” she said. She was there and celebrated with her son and was very thankful for the chance to share that moment. As it turned out, her son would pass away a year later as a result of cancer - leukemia.

Peterson is a stickler for follow up appointments. In the 1990’s, her doctor found lung cancer during one of her checkups. Half of her right lung was removed and she had more radiation treatments. Faithful visits again led to a diagnosis of colon cancer in 2011. This time her colon was removed and she took a “chemo pill” and received radiation treatments. On February 15, 2012, cancer reared its ugly head one more time in her left lung. She stayed in the hospital a

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week after surgery to remove half of the lung. No chemotherapy or radiation treatments are planned at this time because of the extensive treatments in the past. She and her husband, Dean, stay optimistic about this last diagnosis.

“Not many people make it through that many times with cancer,” Peterson said. “My outlook and attitude put me through it. I have a strong Christian faith and a lot of prayers have been answered. I keep up with my checkups with a great doctor. I’ve got another one in three months!” Many of her immediate family members are in the medical profession. Whenever Peterson has a question about her health or her cancer, she asks one of her many resources. “Cancer is all over... one just never knows,” she said.

Peterson offers some wise advice to others who may be diagnosed with cancer. “I stay aware of cancer and I read a lot of information and books about cancer,” she said. “I have a great joy of living and watching my grandkids grow up.”

Several years ago, Peterson participated in Relay For Life walking in the survivor lap. She is ready to go again. At 74, she will be one of the oldest survivors in the Lap of Hope. (Watch for her in one of the golf carts!)

Cherie Armagost, Cozad

An annual mammogram, new technology and the American Cancer Society helped Cherie Armagost of Cozad fight breast cancer this past year. In May, she heard those words “You have cancer” and felt sick inside. “You always think the worst and the unknown was very scary,” she said. In April, Cherie had a lumpectomy and when she returned for a checkup, the doctor said she was a good candidate for mammosite therapy.

For five days, Armagost underwent a targeted radiation therapy that used a small, soft balloon attached to a catheter tube. The balloon was placed inside the lumpectomy cavity. To deliver the required therapy, she said a tiny source of radiation called a seed is placed within the mammosite balloon by a computer controlled machine. She had two treatments a day for five days, the balloon was removed and she was finished.

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During this time, the American Cancer Society stepped up to help with motel costs for the night she had to go for surgery and again for three nights during her treatments. ACS also assisted with fuel costs and provided patient navigator services through two registered nurses who went with Armagost to appointments and answered questions.

“We were so grateful for all the help the American Cancer Society gave to us,” she said. “This will be my first Relay For Life and I’m pleased to be an honorary chairperson.”

Armagost coped with cancer with a strong faith in God. “I knew He was in control. I have a wonderful husband, Jerry... and the rest of my family and church family were very supportive,” she said. Included in her support group are all of her salon clients who she calls her “hair family.”

“Everyone brought us food, cards and money,” she said “Churches were praying for me and I can’t say thanks enough! Cancer has changed my life and we should never take things for granted. When I hear of people who have been diagnosed, I tell them we have come so far with treating cancer. I tell all the women to be faithful with their mammograms.”

Louise Dannehl, Lexington

Louise Dannehl of Lexington has fought cancer on many levels with Relay For Life and most recently as chairperson of the Daffodil Days campaign. She never expected to have cancer herself. When she was diagnosed March 6, 2013 with pancreatic cancer, she and her husband, Jerry, and four sons felt they had been blindsided.

“My family and I are fighting this as a team,” she said. “They have been tremendous – the kids are there for appointments and during down times. My husband, Jerry, is the best caregiver I could have – kind and loving, but stern when necessary.” A very strong support network of medical professionals, church family and friends has kept them going. Louise’s high school friend, Lynn Ringenberg, MD from Tampa, Florida also has been “on call” to answer questions and give moral support, laughter and cheer.

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It all started with some unexplainable pain that prompted Louise to consult with her doctor. A series of scans and tests found the cause to be pancreatic cancer. She is in the fourth cycle of chemo treatments once a week for three weeks, then a week off. The next step will be a CAT scan to determine if the treatment is showing progress of fighting the cancer. Future treatment options will be decided then.

“The most frightening part was to know that it was pancreatic cancer because I thought there was no treatment or cure for pancreatic cancer,” Dannehl said. “Thankfully, I was wrong so we still have hope. I’ve never doubted that God will lead us and bring us safely through.”

Dannehl is no stranger to Relay For Life. “It is a great, powerful event,” she said. “I am proud to have been chosen this year and I will be honored to walk with the other honorary chairpersons.

The American Cancer Society has helped Dannehl and her family by helping with fuel costs, answering questions and providing information and an organizational information binder.

“I want everyone to know... never give up. It scared me to know I have pancreatic cancer because I thought there was no cure. However, there are cures out there and we are working toward that cure. When it seems like there are no cures, there are miracles. I frequently hear miracle stories and I believe them.”

Tina Gruntorad, Overton

Tina Gruntorad of Overton found a lump in her breast last November. A visit to the doctor confirmed cancer and when she heard those words “You have cancer” she was mad, shocked and scared. “I asked God ‘Why?’” she said. “I cried for the first month when anyone asked me about it. I think I am a strong person and I didn’t like not having control of my life. My husband, Dan, has been my rock.”

Since the diagnosis, Gruntorad has undergone a double mastectomy with reconstruction and chemotherapy treatments for the last six months. Cancer has changed her perspective. “I don’t worry about the small stuff. I am stronger now and appreciate each day... it is a gift from God,”

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she said. "It is ok to cry and be mad about it. Hold your head up high and you can get through it all."

Gruntorad also credits family members, faith, and medical personnel in Kearney as being on her support team. Many will be at Relay For Life to cheer for her as an honorary chairperson. "I am very honored and shocked to be chosen," she said. "Thank you to whoever nominated me." She also appreciated the assistance with fuel costs from the American Cancer Society.

This will be Gruntorad's first time at Relay For Life and an entourage of family is expected to be there to cheer her on. "I know the tears will flow," she said. About two weeks ago, she celebrated her last treatment during a weekend with her sisters, daughters and grandchildren.

Janelle Jack, Eustis

Janelle Jack, a teacher in Eustis, had a most unwelcome Christmas present in 2012. She was diagnosed with breast cancer on December 20.

"I felt a lump on my breast over Thanksgiving weekend and that progressed into a mammogram and biopsy. When the doctor told me, I started to cry, held my husband's hand and started asking more questions," she said. "I had a partial mastectomy on December 27 and seven weeks of radiation treatment in Kearney." Janelle is currently following up with a hormone drug treatment.

Cancer did not slow her down. Jack kept teaching the whole time and didn't miss any days of school. "I had a fantastic class and staff. They gave me strength on a daily basis," she said. Family kept her going too. Her husband, Rod and children kept her going and took turns driving her to treatment. "That one-on-one time visiting with them was wonderful," she said. "I think if I hadn't kept so busy, I would have had time to think and it would have messed with my mind. I also have a strong faith in God and He is good always!"

Jack used to worry about the house, being a perfect teacher, making sure her children were perfect and doing community projects. "I now know you have to take care of yourself and those

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who care about you the most. In the end, They are the only things that matter and they will get you through everything.”

Her advice for anyone diagnosed with cancer is “get tough.” “Don’t give up. You are in control, make decisions that are best for you,” she said.

The American Cancer Society helped Jack with assistance for fuel and lots of information. “The nurses also encouraged me to call ACS if I had any questions or needed help,” she said.

Jack has participated in Relay For Life before with the Rolling Meadows 4-H Club from Eustis. “It started as a symbol of support for our extension agent who had cancer,” she said. “It is a great way to work together and the kids had a great time at Relay. It is an incredible honor to be chosen as honorary chairperson. This year has brought so many changes to our life and many of them were very scary. It just shows us that God is good and he will get you through anything. You just have to have faith.”

Pam Ackerman, Dawson County

Relay For Life publicity chair