Written by Pam Ackerman, Hero of Hope 2010, American Cancer Society andRelay For Life of Dawson County Volunteer
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Anyone who has spent a night participating in an American Cancer Society Relay For Life knows how tiring—yet fulfilling—the event can be.

The idea is simple. You get about 8-15 of your friends and/or coworkers together on a Friday night. You raise money or take donations from people who can't participate. Then you walk—for at least 12 hours straight. To simplify things, the rule is that at least one person from each team agrees to walk at all times. Easy right?

The events always begin with one lap with most of the participants standing on the sidelines. Why? Because this first lap is reserved to honor cancer patients, cancer survivors and often caregivers.

Groups camp out near the walking area and spend the hours talking, playing games, taking turns walking the track and encouraging one another. The festivities grow a little subdued with the lighting of memorial candles in honor of cancer survivors and victims that line the walking area. The lights at the events usually are dimmed, and names of those honored with the candles are read somberly.

Sometime after dawn, the tents are taken down, the candles are blown out, and everyone goes their separate ways knowing they spent the night raising money for a good cause.

And, thankfully, the number of people taking the opportunity to participate and raise money for cancer research and programs to help cancer patients is growing in Dawson County. More than 350 people participated in the 2009 Relay last summer and raised nearly $83,000. This confirms that Dawson County remains a very generous place. When it comes to giving to worthwhile causes, there seems to be few limits.

But the success of the Relay For Life events also has a deeper meaning. Sadly, at some level or at some point in everyone's life, we all have or will deal with cancer.

If we are not individually diagnosed with the disease, we all can name a coworker, friend, sibling, an aunt or uncle, or even a parent who had cancer. Cancer knows no race, economic background or geography. It can affect us all.

Many of the volunteers and participants at the Relay events are there for someone else, either in their memory or to personally support someone's fight with the disease. Few events combine laughter and fun so closely with pain and tears.

So to all those who have walked or generously given money to walkers, we offer congratulations on personally making a difference in the fight against cancer. To those of you who have not participated in the past, take a chance, take a stand and fight back against a disease that takes too much.

When you participate in Relay For Life events, you are saving lives by helping people stay well, helping people get well, by finding cures, and by fighting back. We hope you'll join us as we celebrate, remember, and fight back in 2010. Relay For Life events make a difference!

Because of you, more people are surviving cancer and celebrating more birthdays. Join the fight by attending the Kick-Off Birthday Party on Thursday, Feb. 25, at 7 p.m. at Chipper Hall, 144 East 8th, Cozad.