

Volunteers brave rain to fight blood disorders

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Posted: 9/29/08

Even the pouring rain could not keep participants away from the 19th annual Heel to Heal event for children with cancer and blood disorders yesterday morning in Piscataway. The five-kilometer walk/bike, an event of the Embrace Kids Foundation, brought together hundreds of people in Johnson Park.

Eight-hundred forty people pre-registered for the event, said Cynthia Isaac, Administrative Manager for the Embrace Kids Foundation.

"Today, we did have some walk-ins. Of course, some people didn't show, but a lot of people did still showed up," she said.

The foundation, started in 1991, was formerly known as the Institute for Children with Cancer and Blood Disorders. The organization, located in New Brunswick, exists to support the non-medical needs of kids with cancer or a blood disorder and their families, according to the foundation's Web site.

The annual event began in Freehold, and moved to Piscataway six years ago, said Glenn Jenkins, one of the event's directors.

Dan's Hero Fund, one team that braved the rain, walked in honor of Daniel Lorenzo, who died from cancer in April, said Barbara Mingoin of Staten Island, N.Y., Lorenzo's aunt.

"You make the best of it," she said. "It's a shame because all these people put a lot of time into organizing, but, you know, it's always OK when you walk with your friends," she said.

The team of about 25 people raised approximately \$2,000 by the end of the day, Mingoin said.

"You tough it out when it's for a good cause," said Michael Mingoin, her son.

The fundraising goal for the day was approximately \$140,000, Isaac said, but the final amount raised was still unknown at press time.

In addition to the walk and bike tour, the event included a barbeque lunch, contests and giveaways from local radio stations and kids' activities. The kids' activities were sidelined yesterday due to the rain-sodden fields, Isaac said

The Skylark Diner in Edison donated all of the food for the event. The diner does many events with the Embrace Kids Foundation, said General Manager Tory Roth.

"We sponsor this [event] every year," she said. "Anything that they ever need, we always help them out with, and they help us too, bringing business over."

The registration fee - \$25 per person, \$50 per family, or \$100 per team, was the only expense, which entitled participants to snacks, lunch and an event T-shirt. Participants raised money by receiving corporate and personal sponsorship for their five-kilometer trip.

"All the money goes back directly to fund programs and services for pediatric oncology and hematology patients that are treated over here at Bristol-Meyers Squibb Children's Hospital [at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital] and the Cancer Institute [of New Jersey,]" said Randi Ballan, manager of Family Services for the foundation.

The biggest fundraising team in 2006 and 2007 was Kristina's Rainbow of Hope. The team began walking in 1998, Kathy Ignato, Kristina's mother, said. Kristina was diagnosed in 1997 with a form of sarcoma, a cancer of the bone or connective tissue, Ignato said.

In the first year, Kristina walked with her team but died in 1999, and since then, the team has walked in her memory, Ignato said. Since 1998, the team has raised over \$375,000 for the cause.

In 2007, the Embrace Kids Foundation passed 80 cents of each dollar raised to patients and their families, their programs and program endowments, according to the Web site.

"We have over 800 families since we've started that we have helped. I'd say about 150 per year," Isaac said. The foundation has a budget of about \$1.5 million that goes to the families, she said. "It's a small organization that has a great impact."

Isaac said this was the first time it rained at a Heel to Heal that she could remember.

"I've been here for six years," she said.

The foundation has dealt with heat, cold, and other weather conditions for the event, but heavy rain brought on a whole new challenge, Isaac said.

Renee Cummings, Family Services Manager for the foundation, ran this year's event and faced the new challenge of the rain. However, she found that, despite the logistical challenges the weather brought, the event was still a success.

"The whole concept of rain puts a damper on the space, but not on the spirit," she said.