

Relay For Life features superheroes and everyday heroes



Relay For Life Co-chair Lynn Dingey with Kim Kalman and her bone marrow recipient, Stu Fugate of Beulah, Kentucky. • Cancer survivors gather around honorary survivor Joe Slachciak.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALICE GERARD
Senior Contributing Writer

The 25th anniversary of Grand Island's Relay For Life, held June 6 at Town Commons, featured better weather than anticipated, along with a few superheroes and a surprise donation.

Spider-Man and a few other superheroes were present to greet both adults and children. Along with the superheroes were the quiet heroes who are there every day to support and care for cancer survivors, explained Relay For Life Co-Chair Lynn Dingey.

"Our stars of today's celebration are our cancer survivors," she said. "We can't forget the caregivers who have a supporting role in our survivors' journeys. We're all caregivers in a way. Some are the caregivers that are there for treatments, doctor visits, and all the day-to-day crappy stuff that comes along with cancer. Some of our friends are family members that our survivor leans on for moral support, laughter or even an escape from the day-to-day of cancer. Some of our caregivers send love, hugs and prayers from near and far.

"Sometimes, out of the blue, you get a call that makes you one of the most important people in a cancer survivor's journey, all because you took the time to take part in a Relay-sponsored bone marrow drive 10-plus years ago, way back when Relay was still at the high school. That phone call changed the life of two individuals that have since met and have become friends and are now considered family. Those people are Kim (Schopp Kalman), our co-chair; and her bone marrow recipient, Stu (Fugate)."

In 2022, Kalman donated bone marrow, after she was found to be a match with Fugate.

"I think this is my 20th year doing Relay," Kalman said. "I do run the basket raffle, but I'm also co-chair. If you all know Dan McBride, he was sick with leukemia. I got on the list to be a bone marrow donor. Whoever really thinks they are going to get that call?"

Shortly after the 2009 Relay For Life event, a bone marrow donor drive was held, with a number of people traveling to Roswell Park to get swabbed as potential bone marrow donors. McBride, who was Relay For Life's honorary survivor in 2009, died of mantle cell lymphoma in 2015.

"Stu and I were talking about this the other day. I got the call in,

I think, late August of 2022," Kalman said. "I surgically donated on Nov. 23, 2022, in Washington, D.C. They shipped my bone marrow overnight to M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, where Stu was waiting for my bone marrow. It took a year for us to legally be able to know each other. When we did, it was Christmas day of that following year that we had our first phone call. And now, we are like family. He is from Kentucky, and he is here today to celebrate this wonderful day and to be here for all of us. He is Relay's biggest supporter since I've met him. So, come on up and just give me a hug in front of everybody."

Fugate, however, gave Kalman more than a hug. This resident of Beulah, Kentucky, carried with him a gift of \$1,000 to Relay For Life from himself and his wife, Mindy, as well as \$2,000 worth of Southwest Airline gift cards for Kalman so that she could travel to visit her daughter and grandchildren, all of whom were present at Relay For Life.

"(The donation) was a surprise," Kalman said. "In fact, I found out that he had talked to a bunch of people within Relay ... our committee, my friend Joni Golda, who had gone with me to the surgery. He had talked to her, and they knew I fly a lot to see my grandkids and my daughter, and they thought that would be the best idea. He was looking for ideas. I had no idea about it, though."

"Kim is a blessing," Fugate said. "When I went through this process, I always hoped that (the donor) would have Kentucky ties. (Kim's) grandmother and grandfather are within an hour's drive of my home, so I thought that was pretty unique and pretty nice."

"It was quite the cool combination of how God picked me for him, and he was the right person for me," Kalman said.

"One more thing to add to this wonderful story," Kalman said.



"This November coming up, Stu is going back to MD Anderson for another checkup and bloodwork. Dr. Amin Alousi has the picture of Stu and me on the wall in his office. I'm going to meet him this November and fly down. I'm going to Stu's appointment with him.

"Dr. Alousi is world-renowned in the whole leukemia world. He was the one who did Stu's surgery back in 2022. He (Stu) is going back in November, and he asked that I go with him because the surgeon would like to meet me. So, I'm going to take a trip to Houston in November to go to that appointment with him. It's pretty exciting. I'm excited."

Fugate, who explained that he speaks "fluent hillbilly," said he was excited to be on Grand Island for Relay For Life.

"Y'all are wonderful to hold this event," Fugate said.

"I may be a little biased because I live here, but I do love this event so much," said Dilyn Harrison of the American Cancer Society. "We really appreciate anyone who did rain dances this week and switched the weather because that's amazing."

"It is because of what you do that we're able to serve this community. Last year alone, based on donations we were able to make in Western New York, we were able to provide over 4,000 rides to treatment in Western New York. That's huge. That should never be the reason someone doesn't get

their treatment. That's because of your support."

Harrison noted Relay For Life is "about to invest \$2.58 million in cancer research. That again is thanks to your donation and your support."

Dingey described the event as a success.

"I think Relay went really well this year," she said. "The weather forecast had us changing things up in the days prior to our event. We actually loved the final result and plan to keep some of those changes for next year. Our Survivor Celebration was busy all day and there was a great crowd most of the day."

"I was hoping our 25th anniversary would bring past Relayers together, and I definitely saw some folks, survivors and participants I haven't seen since our days at the high school. The survivor tent put together an amazing picture display from Relay over the last 25 years."

The superhero theme was also

a big hit, Dingey said, noting the kids, especially, enjoyed interacting with superheroes.

"They had the chance to meet several superheroes. We saw kids in costumes and others with superhero face paint. It was fun to see them all together for the costume lap," she said.

When asked about how she felt about the 25th anniversary of Relay For Life and her hopes for the future, Dingey said, "There are not many communities across the country that have been Relaying for 25 years. I'm proud to be able to say our community is one of them."

"My hope is that our community will continue supporting Relay For Life so we can celebrate our survivors, remember those that we've lost, and to fight back against cancer any way we can."

Next time: An introduction to honorary survivor Joe Slachciak, his parents Sara and Kevin, and his YouTube channel, "Joe's Corner."

HAVE YOU LOGGED ON TO

wnypapers.com
 Local News, Stories, Classifieds, Coupons, Service Directory!
 NIAGARA FRONTIER PUBLICATIONS

CMP COMMUNITY MEDICAL PHARMACY
716-282-1292
 Local, Independently Owned & Operated Pharmacy Offering Fast & Friendly Service and FREE Local Delivery

Accepts All Major Insurances
 • Workers Compensation
 • No Fault
 • Express Scripts
 Walk-In Flu Shots/Shingles Vaccinations with prescription
 Compounding Available
 Patient Customized Pain Creams

918 Michigan Ave. Niagara Falls
 Mon. - Fri. 9-6 • Sat. 9-3
 www.communitymedicalpharmacy.com

Take advantage of this great short term rate and watch your money grow!

24 Month CD at 3.803% APY

Call or Visit Us Today!
Rates and Terms subject to change without warning

Financial Trust FEDERAL CREDIT UNION

2014 Grand Island Boulevard
 Grand Island 773.1707
 Additional Branches Located in Blasdell, Buffalo, Cheektowaga, Orchard Park & West Seneca

FTFCU.com