

Cancer survivors share stories at Relay for Life

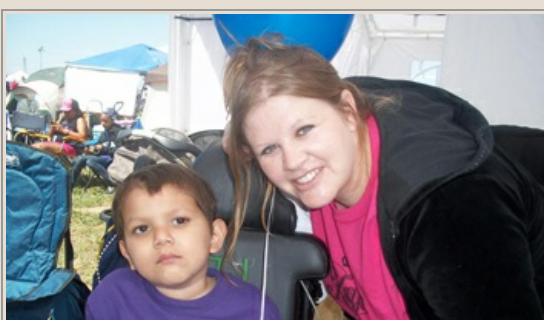
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Breast cancer survivor Kel Sambula, right, and her son. Photo by Emily Shapiro



Lupe Felix, right, and her friend at their Team Boo-Beez tent. Photo by Emily Shapiro



By Emily Shapiro

The morning sun's rays hit the dusty, freshly mowed track as people of all ages and backgrounds gathered and waited. Suddenly, the crowd burst into cheers and smiling participants in red American Cancer Society shirts energetically led the parade.

Then came a few honks from an old, red, firefighter truck with "In Memory of Firefighter Phil." Following the torch was a special group of purple T-shirts, each worn by a survivor. They cheered, smiled, high-fived, and posed for pictures. This was the Survivors Lap.

Thus began the 2011 Bakersfield Relay for Life.

It used to be that cancer was a fatal disease. However, this is now not the case. Before me were people who lead everyday lives, after facing the ultimate with bravery and compassion.

One survivor, Kel Sambula, 45, has been cancer-free for eight years. Diagnosed in August 2004 with breast cancer, Sambula had found a lump in her left breast during a self exam, and was sent to get a mammogram. After a biopsy and positive results, she had her lymph nodes removed and biopsied.

After a positive result for breast cancer her left breast was removed.

Her treatment consisted of six weeks of chemotherapy which she described as "awful." Though she went through a harrowing ordeal Sambula is grateful.

"I was blessed, but I had a good team too. Kaiser is fantastic," said Sambula.

At the "Team Boo-Beez" tent I met Lupe Felix, 44, a thyroid cancer survivor.

After giving birth to her son, Felix was diagnosed with Hashimoto's disease in 2001. According to Felix,

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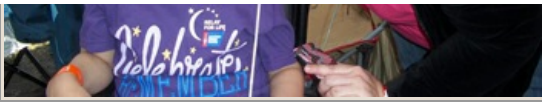
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T.J. Garcia, left, and Second Star to the Right founder Briana Schechter share a smile.



A memorial display for Kayla Blair. Photo by Emily Shapiro



From left, Nanette Clark, Cheryl Johns-Zaragoza, and James Zaragoza. Photo by Emily Shapiro

Hashimoto's is an autoimmune disease of the thyroid. Her family has a long history of cancer. "We have breast cancer, my dad has colon cancer, and my uncle died of Hodgkin's lymphoma," said Felix.

Abiopsy of her thyroid showed that in addition to Hashimoto's, she also had three cancerous tumors. She had a complete thyroidectomy.

She is very adamant about being aware, and gives great advice: "Just get checked, and don't be afraid," said Felix. According to Felix, a doctor can easily check your thyroid.

Though the word cancer may bring to mind a death sentence, thyroid cancer is easier to treat than most.

"Actually, thyroid cancer is the most curable of the cancers and you can usually... have it removed without having to do chemotherapy or radiation," said Felix.

Further down, adorned in pink balloons, and a pink and black zebra sign, was a memorial tent dedicated to Kayla Blair. She had been diagnosed with Atypical Teratoid/Rhabdoid Tumor, or ATRT. According to St. Jude's, ATRT is "a rare, high-grade tumor that occurs most commonly in children younger than 2. It can be found anywhere in the brain. These tumors tend to be aggressive and frequently spread through the central nervous system."

Kayla succumbed to the cancer at the age of 27 months in January 2009.

In honor of her memory, her aunt Briana Schechter decided to start Second Star

to the Right, a local nonprofit foundation.

"After Kayla's death we realized that there was a niche that needed to be filled in the area. There are children in Kern County that have pediatric cancer and we just want to be able to help them," said Schechter.

According to Schechter, the foundation, with volunteers from her family, provides financial help to area families via fundraisers like barbecues, poker runs, yard sales, and more.

It was at one such barbecue that Second Star to the Right helped a local boy. T.J. Garcia, like Kayla Blair, was diagnosed with ATRT.

According to his mother Desiree Garcia, he was diagnosed in August of 2009, after a multitude of symptoms began.

"On Monday we had to come to his pediatrician, because he was throwing up. His doctor told us that he probably had a stomach virus, and if he is not better by Friday to come back in. Two days later on Wednesday, he couldn't even stand up so we took him to the emergency room. I had thought that he was dehydrated, so they gave him fluids and that didn't help. They did an x-ray and they didn't see anything. So they did a cat scan, and that is when they found the brain tumor," said Garcia.

The survival rate for ATRT, according to Garcia, is less than 20 percent.

After his diagnosis T.J. underwent brain surgery, three rounds of chemotherapy, and six weeks of radiation. However, there were some setbacks.

According to his mother T.J. had ulcers after the surgery, and the doctors gave him steroids to help the swelling in his brain. As a result he had to skip treatments, including chemotherapy, for two months.

"They didn't want to aggravate the ulcers. So he went for two months without treatment which is really scary for us,

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because the tumor is really aggressive. It grows back really fast, and they weren't able to treat it," said Garcia.

Now four and a half years old, he is undergoing physical, occupational, horse back riding, and water therapy to relearn all of his skills.

T.J. still has three more years to go before the five year mark, but his mother remains very positive.

"His tumor hasn't grown back so we're very hopeful that he will be completely cured," said Garcia.

Any type of cancer can be devastating. From chemotherapy and radiation to the toll on the body and spirit, cancer leaves its destructive trail. However, what happens when you have more than one type of cancer? For Cheryl Johns-Zaragoza, this is her reality. Even though her family has a history of cancer, her experiences are rare.

Zaragoza, 44, has been diagnosed and treated for skin, cervical, and breast cancer. At the Relay for Life, wearing a rainbow colored lei, a bronze medal, and an engaging smile that could hide the pain of her diseases she spoke freely about her latest struggle with breast cancer.

While showering back in 2009 she found a lump in her right breast and immediately called her doctor. After a questionable mammogram, and a positive ultra sound Zaragoza was referred to a breast surgeon. Following a lymph node removal from her right arm, she started chemotherapy the second week of April 2010, and continued until the end of the summer. In September 2010 she started radiation and finished at the beginning of November.

Having survived three cancers, she has a practical outlook.

"It's not a death sentence when you're told you have cancer anymore, because there is so much being done to be aware of it, like early detection. There are so many more treatment options available and it's because of fundraising, and Relay for Life. Raising money to fund research is saving all these people's lives," said Zaragoza.

For more information on Second Star to the Right, visit their website at www.secondstartotheright.org. To follow T.J. Garcia's battle with brain cancer, visit www.donationsfortjgarcia.com.

Learn more about [Relay for Life here](#).

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