

Celebration and reflection reigns at revamped Relay for Life



By Brock Weir

They were all there for the same reason, but as each person took a lap around the track last month, they all had a different person in the back of their minds.

Hundreds of residents of Aurora, Newmarket and beyond laced up last month for the 2015 Relay for Life, the annual fundraiser for the Canadian Cancer Society. Held at Newmarket's Pickering College, this was a year of firsts for the annual event which is billed as a time to celebrate and remember.

For the first time this year, the Aurora and Newmarket Relays were combined into one event, with the actual relay time shortened from the traditional twelve hours, to a comparatively short jaunt from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m.

Their combined efforts this year have raised close to \$100,000 ? and counting ? for cancer research and care within York Region.

This local care is vitally important for area cancer patients, as Michelle Clayton Wood knows all too well. Back in 1998, Ms. Clayton Wood was diagnosed with cancer. At the time, the Southlake Regional Cancer Centre was still a dream. Patients like her often had to make the arduous trek to Toronto's Sunnybrook Hospital for their chemotherapy and other treatments and, of course, endure the return journey.

?It seems like another lifetime,? said Ms. Clayton Wood, this year's Honourary Survivor, of the fall of 1998. ?I had just left the bank I had worked for to help my family with some health issues. I had been quite tired myself and rundown, thinking it was normal with all I was doing, and raising two children, three and six.

?Spring came with some more bad news: my husband had just lost his job due to a management change at his company and I went to the doctor who was quite worried because I had a suspicious growth. I was operated on at Southlake and I will never forget my doctor telling me it was a cancerous tumour. I was referred to Sunnybrook as the Regional Cancer Centre had not yet been built.?

There, her oncologist recommended the removal of her lymph nodes, radiation and chemo, along with extensive surgery. Opting out of the extensive surgery, she followed the rest of the course, which included three weeks of chemo and 40 radiation treatments.

?I went the whole route being driven down to Sunnybrook by the Canadian Cancer Society Holland River Unit and was picked up every night so I could be with my kids in the evening,? she recalled. ?My husband and I wondered what we had done to have such a horrible situation happen. However, with the help of the Canadian Cancer Society, the Newmarket-Aurora communities and Southlake Hospital, we managed to take it one day at a time. I got stronger and volunteered at my kids' school, my husband got another job, so I am happy to be here and give back to my community, to the Canadian Cancer Society, and to volunteer in the

community.?

Before luminaries were lit to remember those who were not so fortunate in their battle against the disease, it was time to celebrate those working so hard to make a difference. Renee Thibodeaux, a Newmarket resident, was recognized with the Infinite Hope Award, which was founded in memory of Ken Truman who lost his battle at the age of 32. It was his hope, said organizers, there would be a better tomorrow for everyone? and Renee was recognized as the top Relay for Life Youth Fundraiser in Ontario, raising \$8,000 on her own and, with her team, clocking in a total of \$20,000 since 2012.

Locally, dancer Amanda Little accepted a further reward on behalf of her team, Dancing for Life, which sprang from the Oak Ridges-based Somerville Dance Academy. Part of the Relay for Life for the past 11 years, Dancing For Life has now raised over \$100,000 for the Canadian Cancer Society since the team's inception.