

Lace up for a Southlake Run like no other: Virtual SL5K kicks off this week

Each year, hundreds of participants lace up their running shoes and pass under the iconic arch in front of Newmarket's Southlake Regional Health Centre for the annual Nature's Emporium Run for Southlake.

Postponed this past spring due to the global pandemic, the Southlake Run is back ? and this time it's a run like no other.

The SL5K five-day virtual challenge kicks off this Wednesday, September 23 and runs through September 27. While participants won't be running as a group this year, registrants are using any kind of distanced-based activity to help raise much-needed funds for Southlake Regional Health Centre, and it's not too late to pledge your support for your favourite individuals and teams who have stepped up to take part.

?We have re-imagined this event in a way I believe is going to give our community participants a really fun event,? says Sheila Tilotta, Interim President & CEO of the Southlake Regional Health Centre Foundation. ?It is not a one-hour-and-done, it's a five-day virtual challenge. We're really feeling the momentum in our community. Our peer-to-peer support, which is people sponsoring participants, is really starting to climb as we near the start and this year, more than any other year, the hospital needs that community support.?

A hospital always has needs, says Ms. Tilotta, and while the community went above and beyond to help Southlake make ends meet during the first wave of COVID-19, including the purchase of ventilators, the Foundation is looking at what a second wave might mean for the organization.

?The interesting thing we're talking about around here [with] Wave Two is the mental health impact of COVID,? says Ms. Tilotta.

Humans are social animals, she says, and not being out-and-about has started to take its toll. Southlake psychiatrists have said they are seeing increasing numbers of people presenting with anxiety and depression and that is something that will be closely monitored in a second wave.

Southlake recently opened their emergent mental health assessment unit, which is similar to an emergency department, for people experiencing mental health issues.

?As we move through this next wave of COVID knowing that our community is coming together, those funds [from the run] are going to go to meet needs across the hospital, but definitely a portion will go to also meet those specific mental health needs. We have to make sure we have the right beds and the right spaces for people to heal.?

Part of the beauty of funds raised through the Southlake Run, whether in its traditional form or its virtual iteration for 2020, is that they are not tied to one specific purpose and can be allocated for needs as they develop. This was particularly beneficial for Southlake in the first wave of COVID-19 as they had to mobilize for needs that were practically unthinkable the last time runners passed under the Davis Drive arch in April of 2019.

?It is important there are flexible funds that can be repurposed at a moment's notice,? says Ms. Tilotta.

As Southlake looks forward to the SL5K, she says they are ?overwhelmed? by the community's response not only to this reconfigured event but to all their calls to action at this challenging time in our history.

?People don't stand by and wait for others to do something; they get up, they get moving, they get doing,? she says. ?I feel like people are being proactive and they are raising funds knowing that the hospital not only has current needs, but they realize the hospital doesn't necessarily know what is coming and they want to make sure the hospital is ready ? and that is really heartwarming.

?It is amazing to be part of a really unique event and we don't know if it will ever happen again in this virtual format. This will be the event that people will talk about years from now, much like we talk about the SARS concert we all went to back in the day. We saw more registration than we anticipated and the nice thing is because it is a virtual event we don't have a limitation on size. We can all come together and do this. It is one of those moments in history we will look back on.?

To become part of history and sponsor a runner, team, or to simply make a donation to the SL5K or to Southlake Regional Health Centre, visit runforsouthlake.ca.

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