

## Record numbers turn out for Aurora's Relay for Life



**By Brock Weir**

As the sun started to sink lower in the sky on Friday night, the energy was just beginning as hundreds laced up to take part in the annual Relay for Life.

Based this year once again at the Magna Headquarters, representatives from the Canadian Cancer Society welcomed a record 50 teams dressed colourfully, in costume, and sporting other eye-catching gear, as they prepared to do their best to kick cancer to the curb.

'This is a beautiful thing,' said Lynn Pearson, coordinator of the Aurora relay. 'Once again, the people of Aurora have demonstrated the meaning of the word 'community' and their dedication to fight back against cancer.'

Speaking to the crowds, organizers made special presentations 'a first this year' to some vital community partners who conspired to make the evening a success. The first one was presented by Alex Riel of the Society's Holland River Unit, recognizing Magna International with their Excellence In Corporate Partnership Award, which has welcomed Relay to their grounds 'with open arms' for five straight years.

Special recognition was also made to Amanda, Cally and Danielle from Somerville Dance Studios 'and members of the Relay team Dancing for Life. This year, after 10 years of raising money for Relay, they finally surpassed their \$100,000 mark, once again securing their long-standing place as Relay's top fundraising team.

'These ladies have worked incredibly hard to fundraise year after year and have earned that spot in first place,' said event emcee Erin Davis of CHFI. 'Everything you do each year adds up to the greatness that is Relay for Life.'



Rath Kong

While the opening ceremonies were upbeat with dancing, exercises, and live performances from local bands, the events took a moving turn when Rath Kong took the stage. At just 19, the Aurora High School student was named the Relay's Honourary Survivor, sharing her story on behalf of all those who have done battle with cancer and emerged as the victor.

Rath was diagnosed when she was 16. Earlier this spring, after being named Honourary Survivor, she spoke about being nervous about finding just the right words to address the crowds. Judging by the faces in the Magna fields, she struck just the right chord in the intervening weeks.

"My favourite things about Relay for Life begins with the strong bond with my teammates and how we come together to fight and come up with ideas on how to raise money," she said. "When the night comes, we get to spend it with my friends, family, and even meet new people. It is amazing how we can all come together and support those who have fought, are fighting, and who have won."

Although this strong support system was always there for Rath, in the early stages of her battle it was not always something she appreciated, as she related to the crowd.

It was a fight that was far from easy. Multiple surgeries, multiple stays at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, and multiple rounds of chemo took a toll on her both physically and emotionally.

"The most difficult part of my journey was having the strength to want to wake up and go through another day in the life of a cancer patient," said Rath. "When I was diagnosed, I was afraid, of course. I felt helpless and hopeless. Even my friends and family were astonished that something like this could happen to someone they see every day."

"I coped with what happened to me by looking forward to seeing them every week and that is how I fought my battle."

After joining other survivors in releasing doves, Rath helped lead the way in the survivors' lap, followed by several people with numbers around their necks indicating the number of years they have been cancer free.

One of these people was Caramel Selfe. A resident of Alliston, Selfe has been a regular attendee of the Aurora Relay. She said she finds being there on the ground with so many others for a common cause "incredibly inspiring." As an 11-year cancer survivor, she said her "whole God-given goal is to inspire people to keep fighting."

"This provides an outlet for hope," she says. "I try to keep the fight up and it is really important when it comes to cancer in your journey. It is still in the back of my head. when I go for my yearly checkup, the day before I freak out. Even though I know I am cancer free, and I know God has saved me, it is still fear and it brings it all back. Tonight brings it all back and I am so thankful and grateful."

"The thing that goes through my mind is how wonderful it is to be here and be a survivor. I try to meet as many survivors and teammates as I can because it gives me the juice to keep going."