

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Rays of Hope: celebrating stories of cancer survival

If you were out driving last Sunday morning, you may have been surprised to find traffic tie-ups on the roads that are usually lightly travelled at that time. The reason for all of the cars, buses and even pedestrians was the annual Rays of Hope Walk, formally called A Walk toward the Cure of Breast Cancer.

The Walk filled to overflowing the substantial parking lot at the Dickinson Street site of Temple Beth El, the kick-off site. The emotion of thousands of enthusiastic individuals dominated the entire neighborhood, and their commitment to curing breast cancer drove their enthusiasm.

This was the eleventh annual event. The first walk was the brainchild of breast cancer survivor Lucy Giuggio. I'm sure she thought she had a great result in 1994 when 500 marchers raised \$50,000. And that was a great accomplishment, one that is enhanced by the phenomenal expansion in each succeeding year.

Rays of Hope gives families a chance to celebrate stories of cancer survivors like that of Lucy Giuggio. It provides folks a way to remember a friend or family member who has passed away, and it allows all of us to unite in support of the quest to defeat the disease. And thousands of individuals took advantage of that opportunity this week.

Traffic lined up waiting to enter the East Longmeadow parking lots, and marcher lined up to wait for the shuttle buses to take them to the starting point. The buses then joined a line waiting to unload their charges. Participants parked on nearby streets or driveways and arrived on foot to begin their walk. The crowd was gathering.

Pink was the color of the day. Pink rays shone from the Rays of Hope t-shirts; pink balloons formed an arch; and pink medallions adorned everyone's neck. At least one canine participant wore a Rays t-shirt, along with people of all sizes.

Pink placards strung on overhead wires noted the names of the 260 teams registered for the walk, and the stream of cards crisscrossed the lot. Any registered team could personalize its name on team t-shirts, and messages varied from memorials to thanksgiving to workplace solidarity.

Channel 40's Ray Herschel emceed a pre-walk rally. Sponsors and organizers were introduced, and the highlight came when 13-year-old Ashley Gearing wowed marchers with her fantastic singing performance. Then, just when you thought the space could not absorb any more people, the march began.

Men, women and children headed up Dickenson Street and into Forest Park for either a two or five mile route. And the march was on. If you were there, you know what I'm writing about; if you were not, I invite you to join the parade next October. The new record turnout is waiting to be broken.

What about the results of the last walk? Last year's walk raised a record-setting \$600,000 for breast cancer research, treatment and support groups. This year seemed to have more marchers, and though it has yet to match last year's total, organizers expect the final tally will surpass that record. Congratulations to Lucy, to the many corporate sponsors, to the many volunteers who made the massive parade of marchers possible. And thanks to the 7,000 men, women, children who made it a phenomenal success.