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‘Silver Lining in a Black Cloud’

Brain Cancer Survivors, Loved Ones Unite to Raise Funds

In his best fourth-grade penmanship, Jimmy Ronan composed his fundraising letter:

“Dear Friends, I am writing to ask you and your families to join my team, Ronan’s Roadrunners, in the May 7th Race for Hope, a 5K walk/run in Washington, D.C., to raise money for brain cancer research. This cause is so important to me because my Dad died of brain cancer.”

In many respects, Jimmy is a typical 10-year-old boy: He loves sports; he’s not all that crazy about school. But since he took over the Roadrunners after his father’s death in October 2004, he has showed determination beyond his years. When he needed T-shirts for his 155 team members to wear in today’s race, he fired off

letters to local businesses and, within a day, had a full donation. For last year’s event, in honor of what would have been Jim Ronan’s 40th birthday, Jimmy reached his personal goal of raising \$40,000.

When the Roadrunners step out at Freedom Plaza for the 8:30 a.m. race, they will join more than 6,000 other participants on 217 teams whose members also know firsthand the pain and suffering caused by the disease. Every volunteer who has helped make the nine-year-old race the largest national fundraiser for the Brain Tumor Society is a survivor or is participating in the name of someone who is ill or has died.

“I don’t want other people to have to go through this -- nobody should have to go through this,” said Lionel Chaiken, 76, of Middletown, a founder of the race. “It’s terribly frustrating. There is nothing worse than being a caregiver for somebody who has a disease that has no known cure.”

Chaiken’s daughter, Pamela Sue, died in 1995 after fighting the illness for 13 years. She was 31 and a librarian at the Little Falls Library in Bethesda. Chaiken said he likes to tell people he has two daughters, “one living in Manhattan and one living in Heaven.”

“When this happened, I didn’t know what a brain tumor was. I didn’t know anybody who had a brain tumor,” he said. “Nowadays, everybody you talk to knows somebody.” Detection has become easier, he said, but he also wonders whether other factors, such as “the air we breathe,” come into play.

About 200,000 people in the United States are found each year to have a brain tumor, according to the Brain Tumor Society. More than 120 types of tumors exist, and the workings of the disease remain largely a mystery.

With the annual race, organizers hope to raise awareness for a disease that has sometimes lagged in publicity. Last year, the event raised \$1.2 million for research, said race Chairman Barry Glassman.



Jimmy Ronan and his mother, Grace, worked as volunteers at a golf tournament fundraiser in Laytonsville for the Brain Tumor Society, and Jimmy has a team, Ronan's Roadrunners, in today's Race for Hope. His father died of brain cancer.

Photo Credit: By Susan Pollack — The Washington Post Photo

The race teams gather support by setting up a Web page, decorating it with photographs and e-mailing a pitch to family and friends, Glassman said. Creative thinkers, such as Jimmy Ronan, also stage fundraisers in the weeks leading up to the race; he recently held one at an area restaurant. Race-team names reflect the inspiration behind them: Battling for Brett, Bridget Got Better, Larry's Legacy.

Steve Higgins, 35, a District resident, is happy to be participating this year. One morning in May 2004, Higgins woke up with a splitting headache, "like a hammer going up my skull," he said. Tests concluded that he had a "PNET" tumor, a rare and aggressive tumor usually found in children.

On the night he came home from the hospital, after the first of two surgeries, Higgins proposed to his longtime girlfriend, Tara. "Suddenly, the timeline of our lives seemed a lot different," he said. Married that August, the couple finally went on their honeymoon last month, visiting the Amalfi coast of Italy. Higgins also has returned to work as a copy editor at Dow Jones.

"With these things, nobody really knows," he said. "I think the prognosis is, if you feel good, you're pretty okay. . . . I've always been an optimist. I've definitely had to draw on that a lot as far as daily living."

At his home in Kensington on Thursday evening, Jimmy Ronan was ready for the weekend to unfold. He had on his official Roadrunner T-shirt, white with a green shamrock on the back, paying tribute to the Ronans' Irish heritage. He is all business about the race, the same demeanor he exhibited during his father's 1-1/2 -year illness. "He was a soldier," said Jimmy's mother, Grace.

Jimmy described his dad as "both talkative and quiet." Jim Ronan was his son's Little League coach, and "he was always telling me to keep my eye on the ball," Jimmy recalled with a grin. He said he misses his dad a lot but doesn't like to talk about it too much.

The first time the Ronans participated in the Race for Hope, in May 2004, Jim Ronan was able to walk alongside his family -- sick, but feeling much better.

"We hang on to that memory," Grace Ronan said.

"I think this race is a silver lining in a black cloud for a lot of people," she said. "You can't control anything when you're going through something like this -- but this is something you can do."