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AIDS Walk Delaware draws crowd of 6,000

For participants in the event's 21st year, medical advances brighten light at end of tunnel

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During each of the past 21 years, a steadily increasing number of people have participated in AIDS Walk Delaware. The latest installment of the 5K walk was Sunday, and an estimated 6,000 people filled Rockford Park in Wilmington.

By the end of the crisp, sunny day, the event had raised an estimated \$190,000. That's 19 percent more than last year, said John Baker, executive director of AIDS Delaware, which co-sponsors the event with the Delaware HIV Consortium.

Baker, participating for the 11th time, recalled the first AIDS Walk Delaware he attended. About 1,000 people gathered at Brandywine Creek State Park. It was far more somber.

"People just weren't in the mood to celebrate," he said, "understandably."

But the development of more reliable drug cocktails, he said, has led to longer and healthier lives for people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Participants in fundraising events such as AIDS Walk Delaware, whose money directly supports Delawareans, had more reason to believe their efforts would make a difference.

Mingling around the white tents at Rockford Park before the walk began, some of the participants shared the personal stories that inspired them to participate.

Jenna Currier was one of eight members of the Wilmington City Ruff Rollers, an all-woman roller derby league, who joined Sunday's walk.

Currier, known on skates as Tuffy Twofists, had a personal motivation: Her father had AIDS.

Near the stage where Club Phred played classic rock tunes, 22-year-old Trisha Grossi and a posse of friends and family wore T-shirts honoring her uncle Jeffrey Grossi, who died at age 32 in 1996. For years, Trisha's mother, Paula, organized the team's participation but Paula was slain in January.

At Rockford Park on Sunday, her family posted her picture and a flyer offering a \$100,000 reward for the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for her death.

On a table near where Trisha's 3-year-old son Anthony played on the grass was a cake in Paula's memory.

The family's participation in this year's 5K, she said, was in honor of both Paula and Jeffrey Grossi. More than 40 people joined the family's effort, so many that they exhausted their supply of T-shirts.

"It's overwhelming," Trisha said, "but we're doing what we have to do for our team. My mom would want this. She was sick. She was handicapped: She had lupus. But in spite of her sickness, she was here every year. She didn't walk, but she was here to handle the money and hand out the T-shirts. So who am I to sit at home on the couch because of my feelings?"

Patricia Mombro, a 68-year-old from Wilmington, wore a T-shirt with a smiling image of her son, Anthony. He was diagnosed with HIV in 1985. He and his mother used to walk the 5K together.

"We fought a long, hard fight," Mombro said.

Anthony died in 2000. He would have celebrated his 50th birthday Oct. 15.

On Sunday, Patricia Mombro was at Rockford Park with two daughters and six grandchildren.

"Sometimes I can't walk because of my knees," she said, "but I give it my best shot. I hope I'm around when they finally find a cure. I'm really hopeful, and I really believe that there's gotta be something out there. I'd love to see it."

And then there was a man who identified himself as David, a 61-year-old who has been living with the disease for eight years. He sat near the Ministry of Caring's tables beneath the largest tent. He lives at House of Joseph II, a permanent residence for homeless people in the advanced stages of AIDS.

He said Delaware deals with AIDS-related issues better than other areas in this country, and he cites the 5K walk as proof that more people understand the disease and its effects.

Yet for all of the AIDS-related medical and social progress recently, he asked that his last name be withheld, saying the stigma can be overwhelming.

"People with AIDS shouldn't be ashamed, and should hold their heads high. But it's tough for people to understand."

David sat in a chair and chewed some food, his body frail, a cane leaning on one leg.

"I'm up and I'm down," he said. "Sometimes I can walk and sometimes I can't. This happens to be one of the times when I can't."

He couldn't, but many others could. As David spoke, thousands of people began to walk down the hill that was the event's start and finish line. They walked for him and for countless others.