

Bark for Life returns to Pottstown

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LOWER POTTS GROVE — Last year during the nation's inaugural Bark for Life held in Pottstown to benefit the American Cancer Society, Relay for Life went to the dogs.

If all goes according to plan, this year's event scheduled for Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. will be even bigger and better as the dogs once again steal the show at a new venue and welcome some very honored guests to participate in the fun.



Reuel Johnson, the ACS national vice president, and several members of his staff, will be attending the event.

He's the man who had to give the final approval for Pottstown to host the first-ever (official) Bark for Life last year.

"Reuel Johnson, he travels a lot," said JoAnn McKiernan, past chairperson of the Relay for Life of Pottstown, who currently acts as a spokesperson for the Bark for Life across the country. "Every time he goes someplace he talks about the Bark for Life."

Now he's coming to see the Relay that started it all firsthand as it moves to Sunnybrook Pavilion, 50 Sunnybrook Road.

McKiernan said Johnson and just about everyone else involved with the Relay for Life realize what a wonderful idea it is to recognize canine caregivers and the people who they support.

"It's like God's got a plan," McKiernan said. "With the economy the way it is, this is bringing in new people, new sponsors, there's a whole new section of people asking about what they can contribute to the American Cancer Society."

One of the many faces who got involved with the Relay for Life of Pottstown solely through the Bark for Life is that of the 2009 Bark for Life chairperson, Sue Dudek.

"I've lived here all my life," Dudek said, speaking of the local area. "I've attended the Relay a number of times. My husband and I, we'd go over and walk around and check everything out. But when I saw in the paper there was going to be a dog walk, I thought this was going to be interesting."

Dudek said she immediately got involved with the Bark for Life along with her dog Charlie (who is Mr. April in the 2009 Canine Calendar, which features the top fundraising dogs from last year), attending the first-ever Santa Paws event where dogs could get their photos taken with Santa to benefit the Bark for Life. Her involvement

took off from there.

"I think it's great because everybody loves their dogs, so you put together two wonderful pieces there, the love for the dogs, and how they can fund-raise for ACS, which is so wonderfully important," Dudek said.

Last year there were 11 canine teams and this year there are 20.

The increase in fundraising is also phenomenal, Dudek said, noting that as of April 11 there were more than 50 dogs who had raised more than \$100 apiece.

And the fundraising part is really important, Dudek noted.

"It has been so important," she said. "Every time you turn around you hear about someone else with cancer."

It's through the funds raised that research will hopefully one day find a cure.

Dudek said a big turning point motivating her involvement, being a kindergarten teacher at St. Aloysius, was when a kindergartner who had been diagnosed with cancer passed away on Dudek's birthday.

Another student she knows has also been diagnosed with the disease.

"There are too many people and it hits all ages, there's no discrimination and so I just think it's such an important thing" to be a part of, Dudek said.

McKiernan said people like Dudek and co-chairperson of the 2009 Bark for Life, Angie Henderson, are going to be a part of history, because the dogs are going to be an active part in raising the funds that will one day lead to a cure.

She laughed in amazement when asked how the Bark for Life has transformed from a dog walk two years ago to an official ACS event that's taken off throughout the country.

"It has progressed from the Rotary walk (the Run, Walk, Bark for Life held in 2007) where it was just a walk, then we did the first Canine For A Cure team and everyone signed up on the same team," McKiernan said. The second year of the walk, held in 2008 when it was officially the first Bark for Life, more dogs and their owners got involved and so there were more teams. In its second year the Bark for Life participants and their supporters raised \$90,209.

"And so this year we're moving the event to Sunnybrook (from Riverfront Park in Pottstown) because we needed a larger venue," McKiernan said.

Thanks to the success of the local Bark for Life, other Relay for Life events around the country started inquiring about how they could start their own canine event, too.

The Relay in Hazleton was one such Relay. They got in touch with Pottstown's Relay for Life participants to find out how Pottstown has become so successful.

"Of course, the Bark for Life was one of the ideas Hazleton liked," McKiernan said. "They got so excited about the Bark for Life they decided to have their own" and raised \$3,000 during their first year.

McKiernan said there are Bark for Life events being held in more than 30 states throughout the country this year, all thanks to the example of Pottstown's success and the courage and determination they have to make things happen.

"And what we do, and this is the part that is most important, the Pottstown community backs these things," McKiernan said. "If the community doesn't support you, your idea stays an idea or it stays small. Pottstown is extraordinary. Every time Relay throws something out there, Pottstown supports it."

McKiernan said the time to be a part of making progress towards a cancer-free future is now. With a 56-percent increase in the need for patient services funded by the ACS, such as the Road to Recovery which helps cancer patients secure transportation to treatment and the 24-hour hotline which gives cancer patients and their family and friends a lifeline to talk to someone about a diagnosis, etc., fundraising dollars are even more precious.

"That's the bottom line to all of this," McKiernan said. "We are having a great time, there are so many new people, so many new talents and it's all got a cause. In the end it's about finding a cure for all the cancers."

For more information on the Bark for Life, including a schedule of events and a site map, go to www.pottstownrelayforlife.com and click on Bark for Life of Pottstown.

Regardless of whether you have a dog, everyone is welcome to attend the event. Those people with canine companions will be able to register their dogs between 9 and 10 a.m. Saturday. The cost to register, which entitles your dog to participate in the walk and other activities throughout the day is \$25, which benefits the ACS