

Canines for a Cause

More than 470 dogs walk at Sunnybrook

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LOWER POTTS GROVE — Wearing a blue T-shirt emblazoned with the big heart-shaped logo for Tilly's Tender-Hearted Hounds, Debbie Kehs stood in front of the pavilion at Sunnybrook holding her companion Cassie. The little white fluffy dog, she said, is not only her friend, but a sacred link to her late husband Francis, whom she lost to cancer.

"She's my comfort companion. She reminds me of the love he brought," Kehs said, looking down at Cassie's sweet face.

Kehs, of Barto, said Cassie came to her through a connection with her late husband's ICU nurse. After her husband passed, the nurse who had become close to Kehs and her family urged Kehs to adopt one of the pups from a litter her own dog had. Kehs said Cassie has become a constant, tangible connection to the love she had with her husband.

Surrounded by a sea of dog lovers who came out Saturday to make strides against cancer during the third Annual Bark for Life to benefit the American Cancer Society, Kehs smiled at Cassie while holding back tears as she thought about the journey that brought her to the Bark for Life event.

Francis Kehs was diagnosed with brain cancer and had surgery in 2007. He lost the function of his body from the neck down and eventually his lungs failed. He died in November 2007.

Although Kehs, a cancer survivor herself having been diagnosed with breast cancer the year before her husband was diagnosed, had every reason to turn away from the reminders of grief she's seen, she decided to step into the sunshine Saturday along with Cassie and



15 or so others and their dogs who are apart of Tilly's Tender-Hearted Hounds as a way to fight back.

"Emotionally, I never could participate before," Kehs said. But being a part of something so fun, positive and supportive, Kehs said the Bark for Life was the perfect event to encourage her participation.

She was definitely not alone. More than 470 dogs, many of them coming to the event from other states, were registered to participate in the Bark for Life.

They were big, small, furry, barking, yipping, sitting, licking and of course walking. And they were surrounded by thousands of people who flocked to Sunnybrook to participate in the event with them.

Led by grand marshal for the event, Marc Kephart and his dog Hailey, the thousands of people and hundreds of dogs took laps around Sunnybrook.

"This is impressive as heck," said Reuel Johnson, the national vice president of the ACS Relay for Life.

Johnson said he's heard about the Bark for Life since 2007 back when it was a dog walk in Riverfront Park and had to come to see the



groundbreaking event firsthand.

"Pottstown is a great model; a community that takes up the fight. it's a great story we tell around the country," Johnson said.

He brought with him to the Pottstown Bark for Life a number of colleagues, including Frank McGrady, the chief operating officer for the Pennsylvania Division of the ACS, and Ruth Ann Dailey, the regional vice president for the Southeastern Region of the ACS.

"We've got people who are passionate about Relay and their town," McGrady said of the Pottstown community and a few other communities throughout Pennsylvania that have hosted groundbreaking events such as the Bark for Life. "People want to make a difference."

Dailey, who started with the ACS regional office in the fall of 2008, said she'd heard a lot of positive things about the Pottstown Relay for Life and Bark for Life events. They are, after all, successful events known throughout the country and Pottstown is the birthplace of the Bark for Life.

But "this is amazing," Dailey said of seeing the event with her own eyes. "This is absolutely extraordinary. Pottstown's really leading the fight" and demonstrating how to "mobilize a community."

Mobilized Pottstown was as the 470-plus pooches and their people sauntered around Sunnybrook.

"We have our dogs and we're doing something good," said Eva Wagner, of North Coventry, standing with her dog Mitzi. Wagner learned about the event from her friend and accountant, Bark for Life co-chairperson Angie Henderson. She passed the word on to another friend, Tena Sovizal-Hines, of Stowe, who in turn brought her dog Kiki.

"Eva said there was a Bark for Life" and so here we are, Sovizal-Hines said.

Both women said people in their families had been touched by cancer and they wanted to participate in something they could do with their dogs and something that would give back to a good cause.

"It's awesome and we'll definitely do more next year," Wagner said of getting more involved with the Bark for Life teams' activities.

Jennifer DeCarlo of The Reasons Why Relay for Life team, wasn't accompanied by a dog Saturday, but she was out at the event fundraising much like she has done at events throughout the past five or so years.

"I'm just fundraising and playing with the dogs," she said. DeCarlo said she stays involved because it's a fun way to support cancer research and move toward a cancer-free future while honoring a family member who died of the disease and several others who are surviving.

Bridget Clair of Limerick, the proud owner of the namesake for Tilly's Tender-Hearted Hounds, an English Bulldog named Tilly, saw the advertisements for the Bark for Life and thought it would be a great way to merge her love for her dogs and her desire to do something good to fight a horrible disease.

"This is our first year," Clair said. "We were really surprised to see how many dogs came out."

Clair was making her way to The Mercury's Top Dog Contest table to cast some votes for Tilly and her brother Bruno, who finished the day Saturday in first place in the contest with 472 votes, including those cast at the Bark for Life.

Tammy Kelsch of Spring City was at the event, but instead of bringing her own pup along, she brought one she was trying to get



adopted.

"This is Chisel, a 7-month-old Catahoula," she said, introducing the dog wearing the "Adopt Me" doggie shirt.

Kelsch said she has dogs of her own, and recently got into fostering dogs that haven't found their forever homes, specifically Catahoula Leopard Dogs with the Catahoula Rescue, Inc.

"We come here for a good cause," Kelsch said of the Bark for Life. She said about six or so people inquired about the "Adopt Me" sign on Chisel's back, and she was hoping she might be able to find the pooch a home with one of the people she met Saturday.

Jeff Goldstein of Schwenksville stopped out at the event with his wife, Megan, their children, Shane, 7, Casey, 5, and Quinn, 6, along with their family dog, Oreo.

They were watching some of the dogs participating in the many doggie games, such as Leaping Canines and Musical Sits.

"It's a lot of fun," he said.

And the fun wasn't just for the dogs, Megan Goldstein added, pointing at her daughters who had participated in some of the children's activities.

"They had lots of fun doing the crafts, eating the French fries and having their faces painted," she said.

One of the most popular attractions at the event was the doggie caricatures by Mercury cartoonist Alan MacBain.

Anita Church, of Sassamansville, said her dog Salvo was one of the many pups who sat patiently as MacBain sketched away a masterpiece.

"There's a great deal of cancer that affects people, not only in my family but also in my circle of friends," Church said, expressing why it was important for her to come out to the event and give back. "I felt it was really a good opportunity to do something for the community."

Harriet Band, of Stowe, and her dog Xena, and Dana Grygo-Romer, of Pottstown, and her dog Jericho, were repeat attenders who came out last year.

"It's just a good cause," Band said.

"My dad's a cancer survivor," Grygo-Romer said.

Marci and Bob Forst, of Upper Pottsgrove, who brought their dog Frankie out to another Canine Relay for Life event, the "Double Dip Dog Day" at the Coventry Ice Cream Parlor in July, had so much fun that they had to come back for more.

On Saturday, the couple brought a new member of the family, Piper, who they rescued from a puppy mill in September.

"It's fun for the dogs," Bob Forst said. "They did (the Double Dip Dog Day) and it was fun there, so as soon as we heard they were doing something else for the dogs, we had to come."

Sue Dudek, the event chairperson who got involved with the Relay for Life because of her dog, Charlie, said the event was most definitely a success, and it was all thanks to the throngs of people and dogs who made it happen.

"They're the reason we have success," Dudek said.

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