

The Doings

Relay helps spread info, hope back to India

By ALISSA RASCHKE

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Growing up in India, Radha Navani said she didn't really hear much about cancer until she moved to the U.S. 15 years ago.

"With every passing year, you heard more about cancer," she said.

Navani said she still didn't pay much attention to the stories she heard on the news about people stricken with the disease, as it seemed like a distant idea to her.

But four years ago, the word "cancer" took on a new meaning. Her uncle in India, whom she was close to before she emigrated, had been diagnosed with throat cancer.

"It was kind of shocking," she said. "But because of the distance, I felt that there was really nothing that I could do but send money."

In February, Navani went back to India to see her uncle. She said she was devastated to see how the disease had ravaged the once vigorous man. Chemotherapy and the stress of the disease on his body made him look years older than Navani remembered.

"When I saw him with

no hair, no eyebrows, I was shocked," she said. "We were both just in tears."

Navani said despite her uncle's battle, her relatives were misguided about how people develop the disease. She said after she gave her uncle a hug, her mother thought she, too, would "catch" cancer. Navani explained that the illness didn't get passed like a common cold.

When she got back to the States and returned to work in Oak Brook, she heard about a Relay for Life that was happening near her job. She decided to get involved.

"I thought it was my opportunity to do something," she said.

During her fundraising and preparation for Relay for Life, Navani has been gathering and sending educational information and materials to her family in India, to help raise awareness about healthy lifestyles and hope for people with cancer.

"Having been touched by it, at one point fearing you might lose a person you love, it makes you increase your belief that things like (Relay for Life)

works," she said.

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Relay for Life brings communities together

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Despite some rain, teams from all over the Western Suburbs banded together at the Oak Brook Park District recreation building to raise money for the American Cancer Society at the Relay for Life of Oak Brook, Hinsdale and Burr Ridge.

In its second year, the number of teams participating in Friday's event more than tripled, from just seven last year to 24 this year, with nearly 200 participants.

Leslie Abrahamson, a representative with the local branch of the American Cancer Society, said the rainy weather did little to dampen the mood of participants. "It was wonderful," she said. "It was such a great spirit of camaraderie that when the rain came through,

everyone banded together and we moved inside."

The event, held overnight June 20 to 21, included a DJ, dance lessons, food and a performance by the band The Backroom.

"It's like a community festival," Abrahamson said. "It's not just a walk, it's not just fundraising, it's fun too."

But the objectives of the event are never forgotten. During the emotional luminaria ceremony, for example, candles are lit for those who beat cancer as well as those who didn't.

Among the companies with teams were Starbucks, Advocate Health Care and Elkay Manufacturing. Donations totaled more than \$50,000.

"We had a fantastic time," Abrahamson said. "We hope there's even more growth next year."