

## More than 10,000 expected in Springfield for Rays of Hope walk

Published: Oct. 23, 2024, 6:00 a.m.

When Cindy Sheridan Murphy, 63, joins more than 10,000 other people in the Rays of Hope Walk & Run Toward the Cure of Breast Cancer this Sunday, she'll be able to spot the newcomers – not to the event, but to cancer.

Murphy survived breast cancer a decade ago – now she walks with men and women beginning their fight for life.

“When you see the newly diagnosed people who have that fear of the unknown, I remember my own journey and how that fear is still there. It's always there,” the West Springfield woman told The Republican. “The event can be very emotional because it brings back those feelings of when you were diagnosed. It triggers that feeling of “Am I going to live? Am I going to be here next year?”

The Rays of Hope event will enter its 31<sup>st</sup> year as more than 10,000 walkers and runners step off the Temple Beth El in Springfield Sunday morning. There are two courses – one is 2 miles, and the other is more than twice that. They wind their way from the temple, through Forest Park and then back to the starting point.

The goal is to raise more than a half million dollars to support breast cancer care, research and education in Western Massachusetts. In the last three decades, the walk and run has raised more than \$17 million, according to event organizers. Baystate Health Foundation administers the funds.

Dottie O'Connell, a 73-year-old breast cancer survivor from Haydenville, will be among the nearly two dozen members of Paradise City Dragon Boats joining the walk. The group receives thousands of dollars each year from Rays of Hope.

The Dragon Boats are a group of men and women who sit inside 40-foot flat boats that glide low in the water and look like canoes. Each boat holds 20 people who paddle together on the Connecticut River in Hadley, building and toning muscles near where they had surgery to remove cancerous growths. They're on the river two to three times a week, from May through September, exercising the rest of the year.

“It used to be that breast cancer survivors didn't want to do a lot with their upper body. Now they've learned just the reverse, and paddling happens to be a perfect sport to do that. It's hilarious, because I think I'm in better shape that I was in my 50's,” she said.

“everyone heals in a very different way. But for me and my members, we have healed by being around people with a common cause and a way of dealing with it. We're out there working our butts off, having fun and laughing. If we need support, there's someone sitting right next to us,” said O'Connell.

When organizers launched the Rays Walk and Run, their immediate goal was to raise money to fight cancer and support the fighters, which they are doing. The longer-term mission has been more elusive.

“We hoped 31 years ago that we would have a cure by now. We understand scientifically, that's probably a ways off, but we certainly treat cancer differently. We support people differently. We've been able to do so much local research that has been very positive.” Said Kathy Tobin, director of annual giving and events for the Baystate Foundations.

Murphy has moved on from her cancer and is now executive director of Each Moment We're Alive, a nonprofit organization she founded in 2019. The cancer support network helps current or past cancer patients with free services including peer-to-peer meeting and on-line support groups.

The West Springfield woman know how much her group needs community support to survive, so in walking with the Rayos of Hope, she is passing on the benevolence.

“Our job is to support the new people because they’re just beginning, and to give them the strength we drew from other survivors when we were diagnosed, she said. “One of my best friends growing up has passed away of breast cancer, so that fear is humongous. I pulled my strength from other survivors.”