

Running for the Cure

by *Lesa Knollenberg*

I was three years old when my Aunt Jeralyn died. She had a loving husband and one child, and was only 36 years old when breast cancer ended her life.

I was thinking about my aunt last spring while jogging around Lake Monona. I realized that I was 36 years old, with a loving husband and one child. I thought about how good it felt to be running and how much I enjoyed the freedom of health. So it was in my aunt's honor that I signed up for the 1999 Komen Race for the Cure™.

The Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure™ is a series of 5K runs held in 114 cities across the nation. It was created by Nancy Brinker in memory of her sister, Susan Komen, who died of breast cancer at the age of 36. The majority of race proceeds remain in the Dane County area to fund screening, education and awareness of breast cancer.

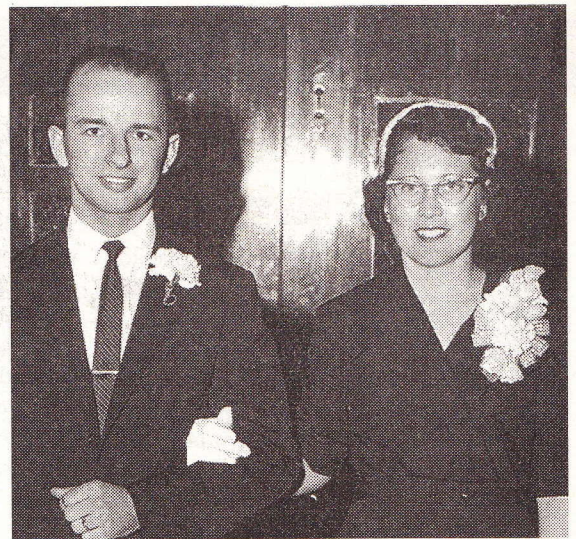
I told very few people I signed up for this race because it was a deeply personal run for me. It was like a little secret I kept rolled up in my gym bag. I started training; I wanted to find in myself that muscle that gave me power to fight all things unfair. I bought thicker socks to combat blisters. When I was tired after three miles, I made myself go four. Every time I thought about the race I got nervous, but also felt that old, familiar flutter in my gut that told me I was on to something good.

The Friday before the race, I picked up my pre-race packet. Even that made me nervous, but I was sensing the impact of this race by the crowd there with me. That night I carefully read through the race information and ceremoniously set out my running shoes, new socks, participant number (825) and pink sign that read, "I RACE FOR THE CURE IN MEMORY OF AUNT JERALYN". My legs were ready. I just wasn't sure about my heart.

The morning of the race was a blur. I stood in line twice to use the porta potty, while I stretched, eavesdropped and joined in pre-race chatter with other runners. Inching toward the start line, I

cheered for the men and boys finishing their race. The cheering became maniacal when a pre-teen boy, all legs and determination, hurled himself toward the finish. Then it was time to line up, and I found myself a small fish in a sea of tennis shoes. I felt nauseous. The race began.

Our path wound around Lake Monona, with a canopy of trees shading the first mile. After a slow start behind some enthusiastic walkers, I found a pack of women at my pace, and settled in. It felt good to be part of a group. The runner in front of me was wearing a pink t-shirt, which meant she was a breast cancer survivor. I thought about her life and what this race must mean to her, and in deference, I stayed a few paces behind.



Lesa Knollenberg's Aunt Jeralyn was happily married when breast cancer ended her life 33 years ago.

My training was time well spent. I found my muscle, and settled into enjoying the day. I remembered that the pre-race packet had advised us to avoid reading other runner's memoriam signs, for fear of getting too choked up to run.

Continued on page 30

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Cure (Continued from page 23)

Against that advice, I read every sign I could. I eventually got teary, but stayed on my feet.

The finish line loomed. I could see my husband and son toward the front of the

crowd, and tried to pick up the pace, as if a 4:00 minute mile was my normal speed. I sped past a woman who was losing steam, then caught the tail wind of somebody else passing me by. All of my nerves, emotion and, let's admit it, heavy breathing gave me the energy to sprint past the finish. I pretended that I was first, arching

a bit to break the tape. It was done. I was proud. I needed water.

That flutter in my gut is starting to bloom again this spring. The 2000 Komen Race for the Cure™ is scheduled for Saturday June 3rd. Last year there were over 3,000 women 5K participants, 800 men 5K participants and over 1,300 people in the one-mile walk. This year they expect even more. I plan on being there, but leaving my nerves at home. It would be nice to get number 825 again, but any old number will be fine. I'll be there to honor Aunt Jeralyn again, in the company of some spectacular, spirited athletes.

For information on this year's Race for the Cure™ call 1-800-435-3405.



Lesa Knollenberg writes and runs in Madison, where she is also in search of the perfect running bra.



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