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Updated: 06/01/06

## Manchester Relay for Life Annual walk-a-thon benefits American Cancer Society

By Heather Matthews  
Staff Writer

As the saying goes, it takes just one person to make a difference, but the Cook, Naczas, Poznanski and Hardy families would rather work as a team.

For the eighth year in a row, the close-knit group of cousins and sisters will come together as Harlan's Heroes and take to the track in Manchester's Relay for Life at the New Hampshire Community Technical College to benefit the American Cancer Society.

According to the American Cancer Society's Web site, the relay got its start in the mid 1980s when Gordy Klatt, a surgeon in Tacoma, Wash., decided to raise money for the fight against cancer by doing something he loved – running marathons.

In May 1985, Klatt circled the track at Baker Stadium in Tacoma for 24 hours straight, while friends, family and colleagues donated \$25 dollars to run or walk for 30 minutes at his side. When it was all said and done, Klatt had traveled more than 83 miles and raised nearly \$27,000 to fight cancer, while 300 people looked on.

Since those first years, the Relay for Life has transformed into an international overnight team walk-a-thon that celebrates life and cancer survivorship, while remembering those who have lost the battle with the disease. Every dollar earned through the event goes toward fighting cancer and helps the society's research, education, advocacy and patient services.

Harlan's Heroes came together after Kay Harlan died of lung cancer in 1998. It has since raised between \$2,500 and \$4,000 each year for the American Cancer Society and has since grown to incorporate other members and friends of the family.

While the group has raised a considerable amount of funds for the society, the Harlan's Heroes participation in the event is more about support and coming together with others affected by cancer.

"We are just a little dinky family team," said Kathy Naczas, Harlan's daughter. "We take a more personal route."

For Naczas, of Manchester, being a part of Harlan's Heroes not only honors her mother's memory, but gives her the chance to do something to help those who are affected by the disease.

"That first year, for me, I felt so powerless because of this disease," Naczas said. "This gives me a chance



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Harlan's Heroes pose during their first year at the Relay for Life. Standing left to right in the back are Meredith Cook, Chuck Cook, Kathy Naczas and Melanie Pozznanski. In the middle is Mary Naczas and sitting is Mary Osbourne. Courtesy photos

to do something empowering.”

Being involved in the relay hasn't always been easy for the group. In the beginning, the team was still feeling the sting of Harlan's death and often felt hopeless and bitter that their group didn't have any survivors participating in the event, said Meredith Cook of Manchester. Even now there are days the team is reluctant to participate in the extremely emotional and raw event, but something always compels Naczas and her family to continue on in the fight against cancer.

“The older I get, the more difficult it is to gear up for the relay,” Naczas said. “But each year there is something that tells me I have to do this. Maybe there is a cure out there.”

In the eight years that Harlan's Heroes has participated in the event, the group has watched the survivor lap grow from a handful of people to a much larger group.

“When you see the survivor lap, you know that we are actually doing something,” added Mary Naczas, Kathy's cousin and a captain of Central High School's relay team.

Cook said the moment she realized how much the team's contributions meant to the American Cancer Society and those suffering from cancer was very staggering.

“We are doing something,” Cook agreed. “We are making strides. At first we felt so powerless, but when you look around at the luminarias so many more of them say ‘In honor of’ instead of ‘In memory of.’ It's just very emotional.”

For more information on the Relay for Life, visit [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

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1662 Elm Street, Suite 100 - Manchester, NH 03101 - Phone: 603.314.0447 - Fax: 603.314.0932