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Giant step for a man, a woman and a cause

05/28/08

By *Kym Byrnes*

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On artificial limb, local man steps out for Relay

Just one year after losing his leg below the knee in a motorcycle accident, Eldersburg resident Jeff Donahue will be taking 1,320 steps -- using an artificial limb -- to kick off next week's Freedom Area Relay for Life.

Donahue will join hundreds of community members who come together each year to raise money to support cancer research and patient support programs through the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life.

Jeff will be walking to honor his wife of 18 years, Roberta, who is a five-year survivor of thyroid cancer.

He will walk a lap with her during the opening ceremonies of the event next Saturday, June 7.

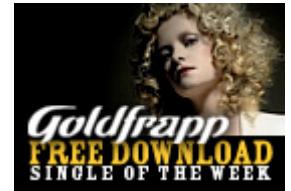
It was a little more than a year ago -- on May 24, 2007, that Donahue was hit by a drunken driver on his way home from work.

He said that when he came around the corner and saw the car coming at him, he was sure he was going to die.

"Right before she hit me, I knew I was dead. It seemed like I thought about a lot of things before she actually hit me and then a second later I was lying on the ground looking up at the sky and couldn't believe that I was alive," Donahue said.



Jeff Donahue, who lost his left leg in a motorcycle accident, gathers with family. He will walk in the Relay for Life to raise funds in honor of his wife, a cancer survivor. Photo by Phil Grout.



Local Poll

What types of recreational outlets would local teens like to see?

- Skate park
- Outdoor movies
- Mini golf courses
- Teen dances
- Other

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Donahue said it was tremendous support from family, friends and community that made his recovery go well.

He said that while he was still in the hospital after the accident, people were at his house building wheelchair accessible ramps and renovating his bathroom and bedroom with rails so he would be able to move around his home comfortably.

"My wife is just amazing. She doesn't even think about it, she just goes out of her way to give me whatever I need. She has made this bearable," Donahue said.

That's why he will be participating in the Relay for Life for the first time this year, in spite of the physical obstacles he'll face.

He said he has lost some close family members to cancer, including his stepfather and stepmother. And in January 2003, Roberta was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

Roberta underwent a total thyroidectomy followed by radioactive iodine treatments to destroy any remaining thyroid tissue. Because of the drug's radioactivity, she couldn't be around their son, Jeff Jr., or the children she cared for as a licensed home day care provider.

Jeff Jr. stayed with family members for more than two weeks while Jeff cared for Roberta at home.

"I think it's awesome that Jeff is walking," said Roberta. "We've gone through a lot, and you just have to keep on going. He lost a limb, but we've seen so many people who are dealing with much worse."

"You've gotta count your blessings," she added. "We realize that we're a lot more fortunate than many other people."

Now, of the Relay for Life, Jeff said, "It's important for me to do this because it's an important cause, especially with my wife by my side since she survived it.

"It will be nice to put the attention back on her for that night," he added. "It seems like the past year has been all about me, and she's the one who has been a super hero the past few years. I'd walk 50 laps for her if I had to."

Birds of feather

Jeff and Roberta haven't been involved in the Relay for Life in past years, but this year they were turned on to it because of their affiliation with Raven's Nest 14, one of 38 Baltimore Ravens fan groups throughout the region.

Donahue is a big Raven's fan. He hasn't missed a home game yet, even through his rehab and physical therapy.

He said Raven's Nest 14 has been amazing in the support its members have offered him over the past year.

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The group annually contributes to charitable organizations and this year chose Relay for Life.

A member of the group suggested that they try to get sponsors to pay \$1 for each step Jeff takes, with one lap being about 1,320 steps.

Relay For Life is the hallmark event of the American Cancer Society. At this overnight event, teams of participants take turns walking around a track, relay-style, to raise money, to celebrate cancer survivors, to remember those who were lost to cancer and to fight back against the disease.

Donahue was hoping to have a new prosthesis in time for the Relay, but he is still in the process of breaking it in. He will wear his old prosthesis and said that he is not nervous about walking at the event. "I just hope the ground is stable," he said.

An employee at Proctor & Gamble for 17 years, Donahue said he plans to return to work part time in July and then full time eventually.

And he's not letting his accident stop him from getting back on the road, either. He's already purchased a new motorcycle.

"It's overwhelming at times, how giving people can be. I haven't really had time to be down. We've gotten so much love and support, there is nothing bad to look back on.

"I can honestly say that I'm as happy now as I have ever been in my life," he added.

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