



COURTESY SHANNA LYNN PHOTOGRAPHY Southern Lakes Newspapers

## Keeping it real

### Police officer to serve as honorary cancer survivor

By Heather Ruenz  
STAFF WRITER

Lina Edwardson said she never thought she'd hear the words: "You have cancer. But she did hear those words, less than a year after a clear scan as part of an annual exam. "To hear those actual words, you go numb and feel lost. I had a completely clear scan in October of 2018 and last June I found a lump," said Edwardson, 42, who is a police officer in Racine and lives in Western Racine County. The official diagnosis was triple negative breast cancer, which doesn't respond to targeted treatment and is more aggressive. Edwardson said she quickly realized the more she talked about what she at times refers to as the "C word," the less power it had over her.

"She created a Facebook group, 'Honey Badger Kicks Cancer's ASS!' (Honey Badger is a longtime nickname of hers.) It has grown to more than 900 members and people are welcome to join but there is a warning: "If you are going to judge, please leave now. I will be keeping it real ... you know, the good, the bad and the ugly," she states in the page's description.

True to her word, Edwardson shares what she wants with that group.

"Even if it was a bad day I put it out there. When I was in treatment



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The largest fundraiser for the American Cancer Society, Relay For Life, will be virtual this year, in part due to cancer survivors being among the most vulnerable when considering the ongoing pandemic. At top: Lina Edwardson (center) said the support she's had from her husband, Chris, and son, Tyler, among others, has been key in helping her on her journey with cancer. She's the honorary survivor for the Racine Relay For Life event, which will join all the other Relays for a virtual event on Aug. 1.

I shared about that. Getting things off my chest was very helpful," she said.

What she didn't expect was how deeply people cared about her journey – and how she was able to give them a different perspective simply by being open about the ups and downs of dealing with cancer, surgeries and treatment.

"Many people had not seen anyone close to them go through it quite so openly but here I was giving the good, the bad, the ugly,"

Edwardson said. "So many people truly care in that group, and the support – especially during the ugly – was amazing."

The group had another unexpected impact, according to Edwardson; it helped prepare a few people who have since received their own cancer diagnosis and it gave them a direct line to someone who can empathize.

"Unfortunately, I've had four people from that group reach out who have since been diagnosed

with cancer. They're all around my age or younger. They all reached out at that scary time when the doctors are talking gibberish and you're not absorbing information. I'm so glad I've been able to be there for them," she said.

#### The future looks bright

In December, following a double mastectomy, Edwardson heard the "C word" again, but it was much

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Laurie Bertrand

### Funds needed to combat impact of COVID-19

By Heather Ruenz  
STAFF WRITER

According to Laurie Bertrand, the American Cancer Society was having a strong year in terms of fundraising and then the pandemic hit.

"It kind of stopped us in our tracks," she said.

The ACS' largest fundraiser is Relay For Life, which honors and remembers those who have been touched by cancer.

Bertrand, who serves as executive director for ACS Wisconsin said it became apparent early on that COVID-19 would prevent Relay events from happening this year.

"Cancer survivors are some of the most vulnerable and the majority of relay participants are survivors and their caregivers. So we knew we needed to find a way to fundraise," she said.

"It was a hard decision to make. We know how much the communities put into

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### •Officer (Continued from front page)

easier to stomach: she was officially declared cancer free.

There were some complications so she's had five surgeries in all and isn't quite done with those yet.

Edwardson is the honorary cancer survivor for the Racine Relay For Life event, which will take place virtually throughout the entire state on Saturday, Aug. 1.

She said she's learning to accept where she's at in her journey now.

"My whole life was turned upside down so I don't know that I'll ever get back to where I was but I'll get back on some level," Edwardson said.

Having cancer brought a new fear to her world.

"It takes your safe place away because you're always thinking, what if. I had a headache last night and ibuprofen didn't help so it's like 'oh, boy' and you go to that scary place. I don't think

that fear will ever go away completely but I try not to give cancer that power," she said.

Edwardson said even outside of her Facebook group, she feels the need to be honest about her situation.

"Even with my hair growing back someone will say, 'That's a cute hairstyle' and I'm like, 'Well it's not on purpose.' I don't know why I feel the need to tell them that but I do. I guess it's just me keeping it real," she said.

Things to be thankful for Edwardson said she was lucky to find the lump in her breast.

"Thankfully it was near the top so I happened to find it or who knows what might have happened, especially considering how aggressive it was and that I had recently had a clear scan," she said.

She encourages people to reach out to their doctor, especially because



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Lina Edwardson, the honorary cancer survivor for the Racine Relay For Life, said she's very thankful for the support from her family including her son, Tyler.

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Relay For Life honors those whose lives have been touched by cancer. It's the key fundraiser for the American Cancer Society, which conducts cancer research and has a variety of resources for patients and caregivers.

COVID-19 led to a temporary halt in exams and routine tests this past spring.

"Cancer diagnoses are down because of reduced tests. There's not less cancer, just less testing and that's scary. People need to get caught up on those things," Edwardson said.

She said it seems odd to be thankful for the timing of her own diagnosis, which was prior to the pandemic, but it's the truth.

"I can't imagine being early on in diagnosis and have to wait for a procedure.

I mean you want that cancer out of you. The mental health side of it is an issue, too, with the isolation due to COVID because cancer patients need people. They need that support," she said.

For Edwardson, who had 20 weeks of chemotherapy treatments, her treatment days were her good days.

"I had four people I would take with me. I'd have my treatment and then we'd go out for lunch so it was a good day. I can't imagine going through that on my own. That support has a huge

impact on how you deal with cancer," she said.

She said her husband of 17 years, Chris, and their son, Tyler, 16, have been a great support throughout her cancer journey.

"They've been great. It was a little hard on my son, who didn't want to come to the hospital but he was born with half of heart, called hypoplastic right heart syndrome, and has had three open heart surgeries himself so maybe that was part of it," Edwardson said.

She said Tyler is doing

great and they're hopeful he'll be good from here on out.

"I'm so thankful I've had Chris, Tyler and so many others here to help me through this. I can't say enough about how important the support is in helping you get through," she said.

Tune in to the virtual event Aug. 1 on the American Cancer Society Relay For Life page on Facebook. Read more about the decision to change it to virtual in the accompanying sidebar.



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The luminaria ceremony, which features bags honoring and remembering those touched by cancer, is popular at Relay for Life events. This year, luminaria is being included in a variety of ways – in Racine, they held a drive-through ceremony; in Walworth County, a video was produced and will be shared on Facebook.

### •Funds needed (Continued from front page)

hosting the events and how much it means to people," she added.

Adding to the emotion was that people already felt so far apart from each other due to COVID-19, she said.

"Once we knew we couldn't do the normal relay, we talked about what our communities needed and the isolation people were feeling. It was important to band together so we could be stronger and allow local events to carry on in their own way," Bertrand explained.

That led to canceling relay events throughout the state and creating a one-day, virtual event for all.

"We wanted to provide a day of activities that no matter where you are or what you're doing you can join what's going on," Bertrand said.

Among the features Aug. 1 will be speakers, fight-back ceremonies, inspirational stories and interactive activities such as a scavenger hunt.

And for those unable to participate or tune in, many of the video events will be queued up in an email that will be sent out to anyone who is registered. Those not registered can request the email with the video links by messaging the American Cancer Society on Facebook.

Bertrand said this year will be challenging from a fundraising standpoint considering relay often raises a great deal of money in-person at respective events.

"When we think about the ACS, and if COVID trends continue, we're facing a 50 percent reduction in our research efforts. If that doesn't state the crisis, I don't know what does," Bertrand said. "The pandemic has absolutely disrupted the support system to cancer patients. They're vulnerable and COVID is undermining our life-saving efforts."

She said the impact on cancer screenings is another reason patient

programs and research will be so important going forward.

"We may see our mortality rate increasing instead of dropping because of COVID," Bertrand said.

Bertrand said the ACS could not have made the transition as smoothly as it did without its partners including its main partner, Kohl's Healthy Families, which works to provide resources to newly diagnosed families in southeast Wisconsin.

"They've been amazing and they love to partner on Relay For Life because it's such a great community event," she said.

To donate to the American Cancer Society, visit cancer.org or call 1-800-227-2345.

To tune in Aug. 1 follow the American Cancer Society Relay For Life page on Facebook and keep an eye out for local events on area county's Relay pages on Facebook.

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