

Darien Road Race celebrates 30 years

By Maggie Gordon

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Some runners fuel up on pasta before a race. This year, the participants of the Darien Road Race will be able to enjoy a birthday cake as the race celebrates its 30th year.

Hundreds of runners as well as friends, family and community members will be in attendance when the race kicks off at Pear Tree Point Beach on Sept. 20, at 1 p.m.

"It's a community event," Founder and Chairperson Mary Green said. "In fact, it was first called the Run For Hope, then we decided it was such a good community event that we changed the name to the Darien Road Race and it's been the Darien Road Race ever since."

The last three decades has brought more than just a name change to the race. The routes and distance have also shifted over the years. This year marks a change in direction in the 10-kilometer race, a decision that Green said was made for the safety of the runners and volunteers, as well as traffic concerns raised by area residents. Instead of running north from Pear Tree Point Road to Goodwives River Road, the course will begin with runners heading south toward Long Neck Point Road, before turning onto Ring's End Road and continuing back around in a 6.2-mile loop to the finish line.

Though the previous north-bound loop had been used for several years, this is not the first time the race has changed its course. "The races that started back then were based on soliciting people to back you for so many cents per mile, then collecting after the race," Green said. "We had a 20-mile, a 10-mile and any distance you could run, and then you collected the 50 cents per mile or however much you raised."

After a couple years, the organizers decided to change the pledging procedure and distance to make the race safer and fundraising easier. "It was a lot harder to keep everybody safe. In order to get 20 miles into a route, we had to have runners go across the Post Road," Green said. "Safety was my first priority and it became a real concern, with runners spread out over the miles."

Now the race features the 10-kilometer route, as well as 1.5-mile race, which Green describes as a fun-run that caters to families and people of all ages.

Atria Darien is one of the event's sponsors, and the senior living facility also brings residents to walk in the event. "We have a team made up of residents and their families, like their grandchildren," said Amy Rowe-Smith, Atria's resident services coordinator. "We walk the loop together and we have our own shirts."

Atria also gives out prizes for the oldest and youngest race participants, in the spirit of

multi-generational fun. "We like to support the community. The road race is really all about fitness and that's something that's really important to us," Rowe-Smith said. "Some of our residents are up there in age, and they're not going to finish first in the 1.5-mile loop, or in Pear Tree Point, but they're going to enjoy it."

This year, about a half-dozen Atria residents will participate, along with family members. Younger family members, who do not have the endurance to participate in the loop of the 10K, have other opportunities for entertainment. The day-long event will feature arts and crafts as well as face-painting, not to mention the cake, which is being provided by the Methodist Family Center Preschool.

But don't expect all the kids to be hanging out on the sidelines.

"This is my third year running the race," said 12-year-old Erika Osherow, who runs the 10-kilometer race along with her 15-year-old brother, Luke. "It was pretty challenging the first time and I got kind of cramped, but we stick it out.

"I think it's really important, because we're all in this together, and we should help each other out," she said. "It's not just about one person. It's about everyone, and helping other people."

It's a fun event, Green said, but at the end of the day, it's much more than that. Over the last three decades, the Darien Road Race has raised more than \$800,000.

"In the beginning, we partnered with the American Cancer Society," Green said. "But in 2007, we started supporting the Bennett Cancer Center and the Whittingham Cancer Center."

The proceeds also go toward the Community Fund of Darien.

"It really is a community event and the proceeds go right to the local community," said Joan Hewson, a breast cancer survivor and long-time volunteer, who began participating in the race in the early 1980s as a runner before taking on an organizational role in 1990.

"Where it started and where it is now are two entirely different places. It just morphed from one simple idea to the next," Hewson said. "It was Mary's creation . . . She's a real cheerleader, and she wants to keep it alive, so she should really be honored this year. It's her brainchild, and she should get the credit for keeping it going."

To register for the race, visit www.active.com; the cost is \$25 or \$30 at the site on the day of the race.

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