

Survivor inspired to strengthen fight against cancer

By DAN WEST
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Jason Maltzman was still mourning the loss of his friend Alex Graham to cancer when the disease attacked another loved one — his mother.

About 13 months after Graham, then a West Bloomfield High School student, passed away, Claudia Maltzman of Farmington Hills learned in February 2000 she had breast cancer.

The hardest thing about the ordeal, she said, was telling her son, other family members and friends.

"It's devastating to go home and tell your family and friends and draw them into this nightmare," she said.

Maltzman immediately began chemotherapy treatments, which forced her to stop working as a first-grade teacher at Spencer Elementary School in Brighton. The treatments caused intense fatigue, lack of appetite, dehydration and many aches and pains.

"There would be days I'd climb into bed and be unable to get up for five days," Maltzman said. "The treatments were really

tough on my body."

But now, the future looks good for Maltzman. Inspired by Alex's never-quit attitude and motivated by the thought of life after treatment, Maltzman is cancer free and will be ready to return to the classroom next fall.

"There's no guarantees, but right now I'm totally in remission," she said.

Fueled by her initial recovery and returning energy, Maltzman will join hundreds of people teaming up to raise thousands of dollars for the American Cancer Society at West Bloomfield High School this weekend.

Relay for Life will use families and volunteers from several southern Oakland County communities who will walk around the school's track from noon Saturday to noon Sunday. Sponsors the walkers enlist will raise money for cancer research. Alex's parents, Bill and Susie Graham, are co-chairing this growing, third-annual West Bloomfield event. Last year, it raised \$132,000; this year, organizers hope to collect \$185,000 and keep the local relay biggest among the many similar fund-raisers throughout metro Detroit.

"More important than the money, we just want people to come out and support this event," Susie Graham said.

To attract spectators, WBHS will have a festival-like atmosphere with face painting, yoga lessons, concession stands, band performances and karaoke. For those impacted by cancer, several medical and cancer experts will be on hand Saturday afternoon to answer questions, and a luminary ceremony will take place Saturday evening to remember cancer victims who died.

At dusk, luminary candles purchased in honor of cancer victims will be placed around the track and in the stands to spell out the word "hope." The effort makes a visual spectacle easily seen from Orchard Lake Road.

As the event grows, Susie Graham said she's more alarmed at how many young people are having to battle cancer. Cancer claimed her daughter in January 1999, and the disease ended the life of Alex's close friend, Julie Wirthlin of Bloomfield, last year.

This year, Susie Graham is talking about Matt Lash, a North Farmington High School



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMEYER

Motivated: Susie Graham (left), the owner of Greetings From ... in West Bloomfield, and Claudia Maltzman of Farmington Hills are pleased with community support for Relay For Life.

alum attending Michigan State University. Lash is battling bone cancer that required part of his leg be amputated. He has lost his hair from chemotherapy treatments, but friends have shaved their heads to support his recovery efforts.

"As I hear more of these stories, I get more concerned," Susie said at her West Bloomfield store, Greetings From ... which has become a comfort ground for people touched by cancer who want to talk to Graham.

"It's sad to see so many children impacted by cancer, but we have a lot of (walking) teams formed by the families and friends of these patients," she added. "That's what makes this event grow and it all increases awareness."

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WEDNESDAY, JUNE 20 8 am Michelle A. Butler 10:30 am Bishop Keith A. Butler 7 pm Jesse Dupont	
THURSDAY, JUNE 21 8 am Kate McVeigh 10:30 am Bishop Keith A. Butler 7 pm Leroy Thompson	
FRIDAY, JUNE 22 8 am Kevin Wright 10:30 am George Davis 1 pm Women's Luchon Kare McVeigh Kenneth Copeland	
SATURDAY, JUNE 23 8:30 am Gloria Copeland	

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