

Racing to find a cure

Cliffs run benefits pancreatic cancer research

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Ninety runners and walkers streamed through the quiet streets of Englewood Cliffs on Sunday morning in the second annual Run for George.

Some came to compete in the charity road race, the brainchild of three local sisters who wanted to honor their late father, George Rubis, a marathon runner who died of pancreatic cancer at age 63 in 1998.

Others came for the food, silent auction and children's games at the borough's Upper School.

And then there was the Perry family of Englewood.

They had seen a flier for the race and came wearing T-shirts emblazoned with a color photo of family patriarch Isaac Perry, who died of the same disease three years ago. He was 54.

"This is beautiful," Isaac's widow, Dina Perry, said in a soft voice, as she rested with her two sons and daughter-in-law after walking the 5-kilometer course. "It's very important and very meaningful."

There is a kind of shell-shocked look on the faces of people who have lost someone recently to pancreatic cancer.

Maybe it's the swift brutality of the disease – 99 percent of those diagnosed are dead within months. The symptoms are mostly innocuous, such as back pain, and by the time they appear, it's way too late.

George Rubis lived 15 months after receiving word, leaving his three daughters – Stacy Rubis, Sophia Duffy and Pauline Rubis – to comfort their mother, Bertha, and gather their lives.

A marathon runner with a 3-hour, 36-minute personal best, Rubis was in perfect health when the disease hit. Several years later, Sophia Duffy came up

See **RACE** Page L-4

Race: Cancer

From Page L-1

with the idea of a charity event.

The family organized, planned, and went, hat in hand, to scores of local businesses to drum up donations.

They raised \$38,000 last year; they donated it to Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions for research into pancreatic cancer.

"It's not a rare disease – people just don't talk about it," said Stacy Rubis, who grew up in Englewood Cliffs, where her father once served on the Planning Board.

About 32,000 people a year in the United States die from pancreatic cancer, said Dr. Christine Iacobuzio, a medical researcher at Johns Hopkins, who came up from Maryland to watch the race. That compares with about 54,000 who die of colon cancer, Iacobuzio said.

There are studies under way, including a clinical trial that is successfully identifying early stages of pancreatic cancer using an ultrasound technology. While promising, Iacobuzio said, it's expensive.

What the medical community would like to find is a simple and

less expensive blood test, such as the one commonly used to diagnose prostate cancer.

"Economics drives medical research," Iacobuzio said. And pancreatic cancer is no exception.

Less than 1 percent of federal research dollars go toward pancreatic cancer, despite the disease's fatality numbers.

"That's why events like this are so tremendously important," Iacobuzio said.

The Rubis sisters hope their race – won Sunday by 15-year-old Matt Mosca – and auction event will spark interest in fighting the disease.

"You can't sit back and wait for the magic to happen," Stacy Rubis said. "You have to roll up your sleeves."

Inside the school, where some people dug into traditional Rubis family Greek dishes, Bertha Rubis walked over toward Dina Perry.

The women's eyes met.

"We can't help ourselves," Rubis told Perry, who nodded. "But maybe we can help others."



BETH BALBIERZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Fourteen-year-olds Marisa Ayvaliotis, left, and Jenna Hobeika racing hand in hand to the finish line in the second annual Run for George in Englewood Cliffs.