

Dundee



A ONE-FINGER SALUTE



Seneca Falls

Middle Finger 5K and Thrive to Survive tell cancer to bug off

By Community Health Staff

In 2010, the Harris family's world was rocked when their 10-year-old son was diagnosed with a rare form of brain cancer. While the Harris family was reeling from the news, they saw first-hand the lack of support and resources in their hometown of Geneva.

Two years later, Jen Harris, her sister-in-law and a friend founded Thrive To Survive, a non-profit group that supports adults with cancer in their community.

"We weren't sure what we were going to do, but we knew we wanted to do something," says Harris, an instructional coach in Lyons Central School District and a former teacher in Geneva City School District. "In a short time, we realized how great the need was, not only in Geneva but in neighboring communities."



Thrive to Survive soon expanded its reach to include all communities in Ontario, Seneca, Yates, and Wayne Counties.

On a whim, Harris organized the first Middle Finger 5K. The name was inspired by Seneca Lake being one of the middle Finger Lakes, while the metaphorical meaning aligned with Harris' feelings toward cancer.

"Our first event exceeded our expectations on every level," she says. "The camaraderie and experience were so uplifting for all involved. Many people ran in honor or memory of loved ones who had experienced cancer. People walked or ran in harmony for the same reason — to give a one-finger salute to cancer."

Thrive To Survive is unique in that 100% of donations go directly to its programs, services and people in the four counties it serves.

"The money helps people right here," Harris says. "The same goes for the Middle Finger 5K: 100% of what we raise goes to provide these necessary resources."

The 2023 Middle Finger was held May 13. More than 1,200 participants walked or ran the 3.1-mile loop at the north end of

Seneca Lake, and afterward feasted on breakfast burritos, coffee and juice.

"And, of course, cake by the lake," Harris says. "It is a feel-good way to start the day, and participation has an immediate positive impact on our local community members."

Midlakes

Seven staff members from Phelps-Clifton Springs Central School District participated in the Middle Finger 5K.

Phelps-Clifton Springs CSD Wellness Coordinator David Hornbeck was responsible for recruiting participants to compete in the 3.1-mile race held at the Finger Lakes Visitor Center and says he is already looking forward to a bigger and better showing next year.

"It was a beautiful day and perfect setting for a race," Hornbeck says. "I wished we had more participants, and I'm hoping for a bigger turnout next year for this race."

Hornbeck also hopes the district has an "official team" in the race in 2024. Although seven members from Phelps-Clifton

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Romulus



Romulus

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Springs CSD participated, there was not an official district team, he says.

“I’d like to have an official team for next year’s event and support a few of our students who are going through chemotherapy for their individual battles with cancer,” Hornbeck says. “I loved the race and hope to do it again next year.”

Dundee

For the first time in its history, teachers and staff members from Dundee Central School District joined together and participated in the Middle Finger 5K.

“Our involvement began through Jen Harris from the ‘Thrive to Survive’ organization,” says Laura Rollins, a fourth-grade teacher at DCSD. “Jen is a Geneva local and has an amazing outreach through her time teaching at Geneva public schools, Hobart and William Smith, and Lyons school districts and encouraged [Dundee staff] to participate.”

Rollins says 12 people participated from Dundee, and the feedback was extremely positive.

“Everyone enjoyed themselves and has made a pledge to bring at least one new person to walk or run next year,” she says. “Spouses and family members are welcome as well, so we look forward to bringing a bigger team next year.”

Seneca Falls

The Middle Finger 5K started bright and early at 6 a.m., but that didn’t prevent a pair of teams from Seneca Falls CSD from participating in the annual 3.1-mile walk/run.

“It was an early rise — especially for those of us who live far outside the area, but it was a beautiful way to start the weekend together,” says Dr. Breana Mullen, the assistant principal at Myn-

derse Academy.

Mullen says Seneca Falls’ first team consisted of staff and faculty from Elizabeth Cady Stanton School, and the second team was open to the rest of the district.

“I don’t have the exact number of all who participated, but we had staff from each school building in our district,” she says. “Our wellness coordinators Amanda Lowden-Fleig and Lindsay Wilson did a phenomenal job of putting the word out to everyone in our district about upcoming wellness events and activities.”

Mullen says the district did a great job of encouraging people to participate via the monthly wellness newsletter and email reminders. She described it as a “fantastic day,” which was evident to many in attendance as Seneca Falls had multiple employees dance to the finish line instead of running or walking.

“We look forward to participating each year and growing our participation in this and so many other wonderful events in our area,” she says. “It’s a wonderful way to raise money helping those in need and connecting as a staff within our communities.”

Geneva City

When Geneva City School District teacher Jennifer Davison was tasked with being one of the organizers for the West Street School’s participation in the Middle Finger 5K, she admits there was a bit of uncertainty on her end.

“I wasn’t really sure what I was getting into as a team organizer or event organizer for West Street School, but I felt it was important to support our colleagues who they themselves or have loved ones who are at various stages in their journey with cancer,” Davison says. “I also wanted to support Thrive To Survive because they have supported many colleagues and their family members.”

THE FIGHTING SPIRIT

By Jen Harris

Instructional Coach, Lyons Central School District

As the vibrant colors of dawn spilled across the horizon, a breathtaking sight unfolded at the Middle Finger 5K. A collective spirit of community, fitness and compassion seamlessly intertwined during the early morning of May 13 in Geneva.

Held in support of Thrive To Survive — a Geneva-based organization committed to raising cancer awareness — this unforgettable event brought together several area school district teams, creating a tapestry of hope and determination.

With a 6 a.m. start, more than 1,200 participants and one dancing unicorn gathered, their faces glowing with anticipation at the starting line. Remarkable enthusiasm was felt throughout the morning, knowing that every stride would contribute to the fight against cancer for folks in the Finger Lakes region.

The air was filled with cheers and applause as participants maneuvered through the course, displaying exceptional athleticism and offering hope. Supporters lined the route, their encouraging words creating a symphony of motivation that fueled participants' determination.

Many area school districts participated, exuding a sense of unity and compassion. The participating school teams embraced a collective purpose: to raise funds for Thrive To Survive, which tirelessly supports adults affected by cancer. Through their involvement, participants showcased their physical prowess and demonstrated the power of coming together for a cause greater than themselves.

As the sun illuminated the final stretch, an electrifying sense of accomplishment filled the air. Crossing the finish line, participants were greeted with exuberant applause and a post-race meal, celebrating their dedication to fitness, camaraderie and philanthropy.

Davison described it as an “honor” to be involved with an event supporting Thrive to Survive.

“I hope my colleagues, friends and family members felt the support everyone gave through their participation,” she says.

Approximately 40 individuals from West Street School participated in the 5K as well as some from other schools in the district, Davison says.

“I was very pleased with the support and enthusiasm for those that were able to join our team,” she says. “I hope to expand the participation of GCSO in the future. Now that I have done it at the building level, I’m sure, with a little help from some friends and colleagues at other buildings, we can make this a large GCSO team.”

Waterloo

Since the inaugural Middle Finger 5K started in 2017, more than 60 members of the Waterloo Central School District have participated in the event either as a walker, runner or volunteer.

The 2023 installment of the popular 3.1-mile race once again featured representation from Waterloo as two teams featuring staff



The Middle Finger 5K is not merely a race — it is a manifestation of hope and resilience. It reminds us that even in the face of adversity we can find solace in the warmth of community and the power of collective action. Every dollar raised directly supports the programs and services provided by Thrive To Survive. Participants celebrated their triumphs of completing the 5K and the knowledge they made a tangible difference in the lives of many people who are battling cancer.

The 2023 Middle Finger 5K raised more than \$60,000, all of which will be used to support those battling cancer in Ontario, Seneca, Yates and Wayne counties.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all the participating school teams, participants, volunteers and generous donors who made the 2023 Middle Finger 5K a resounding success. Together, we have shown that the human spirit shines bright.

To learn more about Thrive To Survive and the supports and services it offers, check out thrivetosurvive.org. You can also learn more about the Middle Finger 5K, how it came to be and the inspiration that started it all.

If you know of someone that could use Thrive to Survive’s resources, please direct them to the organization’s website, or to Jen Harris at (315) 945-4515 or jen@thrivetosurvive.org.

members and faculty were formed, according to WCSO teacher Jean Shutter.

“We are pleased with the participation, but would love and welcome more teams and volunteers in the future,” Shutter says. “Our goal is to have one team from each school or a full-on ‘Waterloo Strong’ team next year.”

The WCSO sent regular emails from the MF5K committee encouraging participation and offering discounted entrance fees, according to Shutter.

“All schools in the district were encouraged to participate,” she says. “The event itself was very exciting and enjoyable. There was great music, an amazing sunrise, free breakfast and even a dancing unicorn.”

Shutter says she spoke to one WCSO staff member who was thrilled to compete and raise funds and awareness for a great cause.

“The participant said the energy was so positive that they felt like they could take on the world,” she says. “I’m looking forward to keeping this great event going and growing.”