

New Race Director Leads Children's Cancer Run To Success

Written by Taylor Seely

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This Saturday marks Grand Canyon University Foundation's Sixth Annual "Run to Fight Children's Cancer," a 10k and 5k race plus a quarter-mile survivors walk, to raise funds for Phoenix Children's Hospital and Children's Cancer Network.

In the five years leading to this point, the race raised nearly \$375,000 for its beneficiaries; its goal this year is to reach half a million dollars.

While race day will exert a special magic in the air as the expected crowd of 3,000 will hit the ground in golden shoelaces symbolizing childhood cancer awareness, those who worked diligently to formalize the run will finally see their efforts pay off. The hundreds of registered participants present in the flesh will be a much-deserved triumph for these behind-the-scenes heroes, as the preparation for this year's race has been more intense and strategic than any other year. The woman behind the race's change is GCU's new community outreach leader and race director, Debbie Accomazzo.

"She has completely flipped this entire Run to Fight cause on its head in the best of ways," Marissa Rutherford, fundraising committee member and GCU Peoria campus staff member says. "This woman is like nothing I have ever seen. Debbie's incredible."

Accomazzo came out of the corporate financial world and transitioned into non-profit work in the late 1990's when her kids were transitioning from elementary to middle school. She worked in the Catholic diocese, National Kidney Foundation of Arizona, and many other charitable organizations before arriving at GCU this past August.

"This has kind of been the little engine that could within GCU," Accomazzo says. "It had tremendous support from day one, (but) it was a pretty small team that pulled off Run to Fight the first five years."

Since August, she's been working with what she describes as the "internal" and "external" GCU community. The Grand Canyon University Foundation, a 501C3 nonprofit, is a separate entity from the University and its student body, but Accomazzo has channeled her years of experience and assembled several committees comprised of GCU students, plus four race assistants, also students.

Samantha Ness, a sophomore race assistant who helped with the event in 2015, says Accomazzo's involvement this year has brought a new level of professionalism and encouragement. "With the rest of the team, we're all very dynamic in our own ways, and we all have different field and majors chosen," Ness says, "and she's found our strengths and figured out how to make it so we can all work together."

Accomazzo has titled Ness, "experience," because of her pre-existing knowledge of the event. "We talk about our patients, our kids, as cancer-fighting super heroes," Accomazzo says. On race day, cancer survivors don golden capes for their "super heroic" strength. "(When) I was meeting with the race assistants...I thought, we need to look and see, what is our super power? What do we bring to the table?"

Even in indirect ways, Accomazzo has left lasting impressions on those she works with. For Rutherford, she was drawn to the race through the loss of her young, handicapped brother who passed from water on the brain, hydrocephalus. "It's the most devastating experience that no one should have to go through," Rutherford says. Compounding her pain, a few months ago her father was diagnosed with cancer. Her brain went immediately to worst-case scenarios upon first finding out.

Being around Accomazzo and the other committee members, Rutherford says the women are, "kind beyond words. They have really changed my outlook on this whole cancer diagnosis. There is still hope. There are still people...fighting and continuing to fight and beat this thing. These women have truly been a blessing."

It might be Accomazzo's firsthand experience with cancer, losing her own mother to breast cancer that has enabled her sensitive and positive spirit to guide her committees through. It might be her years of experience. Whichever it is, Accomazzo is determined to make this year's run a success.

"The only rule for Run to Fight is to remember there are no showstoppers. The show will go on; it does not matter how stressful a day might be," Accomazzo says. "We're going to put on an amazing event, there's going to be some beautiful moments, and it's going to impact the children's cancer community."

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RACE DAY INFO:

Where: Grand Canyon University – 3300 W. Camelback Road

When: March 12, 2016

7 a.m. – 10k

7:45 a.m. – 5k

9 a.m. – Cancer Survivors Walk

What: A race benefiting Phoenix Children's Hospital and Children's Cancer Network. Additional activities include a vendor expo, arts and crafts, jump castles, music and more!

How to register/More info: [Click Here](#)