

Running With Friends at the Lawton Run-a-thon

This September 24th marks the fourth annual Lawton Run-a-thon, held at Ann Arbor's Lawton Elementary School. Kids and parents will come to enjoy a fun-filled day as they jog around the track laid out on the playground. Since school started, the students have been collecting pledges from friends, neighbors, and grandparents to raise money for the Lawton P.T.O. and the John R. Crosby Foundation.

John Crosby was a third grader at Lawton when he died of Adrenocortical Carcinoma in October of 2001. During John's time at C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, his two brothers, Walter (now 15), and Henry (now 8), and his parents, Paula and Walt began helping other families whose children were fighting cancer. After John's passing, their devotion to helping others only intensified. Instead of retreating, they kept fighting by starting the foundation that bears John's name.

The John R. Crosby Foundation has been instrumental in raising money for Mott Hospital's Child and Family Life, which helps families deal with the stress of hospitalization. The foundation also donates to the Giving Library, which supplies new books to patients (John was an avid reader), to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, and to the Adrenal Cancer and Comprehensive Cancer Center. Recently, they donated DVD players for each bed in the Pediatric ICU.

The Crosbys know exactly how it feels to battle illness. Unfortunately, cancer would not leave them alone. In February 2002, Walt was diagnosed with a sarcoma in his neck. Despite this new challenge, he and his wife kept the foundation active. They were instrumental in starting the Lawton Run-a-thon, which donates fifty percent of its proceeds to John's fund. The Crosby's enthusiasm and energy has been inspirational these past four years.

I first met Walt Crosby in business. His telecommunications company sold my company its phone system in the early 1990s. When most sales people pay a call to our office, my first reaction usually is to wonder how much time it will take. Whenever Walt came by, it was like seeing an old high school buddy. His sense of humor had me falling off my chair laughing. He was such a good guy that everyone in our office was happy to see him. He could have been selling Fisher-Price phones, and we still would have welcomed him.

Over the years, I lost touch with Walt—not because we stopped using his company, but because our phones worked so well. Then one day I was asked to help with the creation of the school's new Run-a-thon. I showed up to the first meeting and there was Walt, sitting at the table with a big grin on his face. It had been years since I'd last seen him. At first glance, he didn't look like the same guy who sold me our communications equipment. He had lost some weight and his hair was gone from the treatment of his cancer, but there was no mistaking that wit and sparkle in his eye.

Walt and I had a lot of fun helping to organize that and subsequent Run-a-thons at Lawton. Unfortunately, in 2003, he permanently lost his voice in an operation. He was now speaking out of an electrolarynx—a device you hold up to your neck that creates a monotone, electronic voice. Walt joked that the students in the school called him the “robot man.”

Despite his health problems, Walt still managed to help make our committee meetings a pleasure. He offered a lot of good ideas as well as good humor. He would make a quip; I would tell him that he needed to work on his delivery. He may not have been feeling good during many of the meetings, but he and Paula were perpetually energetic.

Back in February, Walt lost his battle with cancer. Even though we knew that he was in the fight of his life, it still came as a shock. It was surprising in that he was just starting to undergo a promising new round of treatment. And, it was surprising in that he had always been so optimistic and full of life.

As you might have guessed, Paula Crosby is still active with this year’s Lawton Run-a-thon. As usual, the event will be a grand day and a lot of fun. Kids will raise money for great causes, while enjoying a healthy activity. I’ll be there, too—running with friends by my side and friends in my heart. If I should stub my toe, or trip over my size twelve feet, I’m sure John and Walt will fall off their cloud laughing.

For more information on John’s foundation, visit www.johnrcrosby.org.

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