

Residents run for their lives

By Bill Shaw

The Facts

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WEST COLUMBIA — Former Lake Jackson resident Sue Wheeler did not want to get up and run Saturday morning, but she remembered the Friday funeral of a friend who died of cancer. Then Wheeler rolled out of bed and motored down from Houston to join 59 other runners and walkers, some cancer survivors, in the inaugural ConocoPhillips/Chevron Phillips Run for Your Life 5K.

Paul Barriga, 37, of Lake Jackson led the pack of 33 runners and finished first in 18:22. Barriga made the 3.1 mile loop from Jefferson St. down to the Varner Hogg Plantation and back with an average 5:55 mile pace.

"I wanted to be around 18 minutes, not too fast, not too slow," said Barriga.

Brazosport sophomore Clifford Wittig took the lead early, but lost it about halfway into the race. Wittig finished second in 18:50, 28 seconds behind Barriga.

"At the very beginning, I was in front," said Wittig. "I fell back into third at the half-mile marker, but moved back into second and stayed there for the rest of the race."

Grant Parker of West Columbia finished third overall in 20:17, 1:27 behind the younger Wittig.

"I haven't been running and had a bad winter," said Parker, 24. "I fell back to third after the first mile and stayed there."

On the heels of her husband, Wendy Parker finished seventh overall and first in the open female competition in 20:42, a 6:41 race pace. Parker trailed her husband by 25 seconds.

"I don't think he would have let me beat him," she said. "But I wasn't contested by any other female runner."

Sue Wheeler, 44, who remembered her friend's funeral, was the second female runner across the line. She finished ninth overall in 22:05, a 7:07 pace, and won first place in the female masters (40 plus) competition.

"I didn't really want to get out of bed and run this morning," she said. "But my friend was over my shoulder."

Jennifer Williams, 29, and her friend, cancer survivor Susan Alvarado, 51, finished shoulder to shoulder, 18th and 19th overall. Williams placed second in the female open competition in 28:10, and Alvarado finished second in the female masters competition in 28:11.

"This is my first race in three years; Susan motivated me to finish," said Williams. "I started out great, it got a little rough in the last mile, but I finished strong. I work at ConocoPhillips, and I came out to support the race."

"I wanted to support the fund raising," said Alvarado, a three-year cancer survivor. "Jennifer and I work together, and she has such a nice stride."

Chelette Payne, 36, ran her first race, finished 24th overall in 32:31, and won third place in the female open competition.

"I work at ConocoPhillips; my husband runs. I saw we were going to have this event, so I ran," said Payne.

Payne ran with her friend Jill Goff, 41, who finished one second ahead of her and won third in the female masters competition. Goff was unavailable after the race for comments.

Paul Cooley, 55, of Houston, and Bob Bowden, 48, of Lake Jackson, finished fifth and sixth overall, respectively, in 20:30 and 20:34, to garner first and second places in the male masters competition.

"At the three-mile, I tried to catch the fourth overall," said Cooley. "As soon as I got even with him, he took off."

"Paul was a good 20 yards ahead of me at the three-mile mark; I sped up to try to catch him, but he sped up to try to catch the kid ahead of him," said Bowden. "He was pretty much ahead of me the whole race."

Almost two and a half minutes behind Bowden, Ralph Corry, 57, of Lake Jackson, finished 10th overall and third in the male masters competition in 22:30.

"I couldn't even see Bob, much less catch him," said Corry.

Mary Koether led the pack of 27 walkers in 39:45 for first place in the female competition. Beth Johnson finished second in 40:11, and Anh Le finished third in 40:53.

In the male walker competition, Wilson Huffer finished first in 42:36, Anthony Evers finished second in 46:27 and Dan Roddy finished third in 46:29.

Supported by granddaughter Aimee Holland, 7, cancer survivor Earlene

Kopecky, 69, walked the 5K distance in 70:51. Kopecky has been cancer-free for 15 years.

"I walked to help other people and for funds for the Relay for Life and it's good for me," said Kopecky of Brazoria.

All proceeds from the Run for Your Life go to Relay for Life, an all-night relay in Angleton on April 28 that benefits the American Cancer Society. The Health Wellness Committee of ConocoPhillips and ChevronPhillips organized the Run for Your Life and did better than expected in their fund raising.

"We did fantastic," said Sylvia Ochoa, Health Wellness Committee chair. "We weren't expecting this great of a turnout. We raised about \$1600."

Teresa Holland directed the event. Holland, a one-year cancer survivor, is the daughter of Kopecky and mother of Aimee Holland.

Like Wheeler, many walkers participated to remember cancer victims.

"I'm a first time walker, and my aunt is a breast cancer survivor," said Faye Alexander. "She was diagnosed in her 40s or 50s and is 72 now. This makes me think of how strong she was, and I do this to think of her."

Right behind her mother and pushing her daughter Natale, 7 months, in a stroller, Melissa Alexander, walked to support the family.

"We just discovered a month ago that my husband's aunt has cancer," said walker Linda Furch, who participated in support of another cancer victim.

"I think everyone was pumped up for this event," said third-place female winner Payne. "It was fun."