

Businesses join Relay group to raise awareness

September is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month, and more than a dozen local businesses have joined forces with the Gail's Anatomy Relay For Life team to help people recognize the teal blue ribbons.

Area businesses are promoting ovarian cancer awareness in September through a variety of displays, brochures, articles and other educational methods. The Aiken locations include Up & Away Balloons and Gifts, Atlantic Broadband, the Necessary Arrangements, Curves for Women, Dunkin' Donuts, the Aiken Chamber of Commerce, PowerCuts Salon & Spa, Target Corp., Innovative Solutions, Jim Hanna Sports, Denise Jane Portrait Design, skirt! Magazine and the Savannah River Site. The Augusta locations include Lamar Advertising, University Hospital and Augusta Oncology Associates. The Gail's Anatomy team has also put up two billboards in Augusta and Aiken for the month of September.

"We put our posters up in mid-September and started wearing ribbon stickers, and we've had a great response, a lot of people asking about it," said Charles Hartz, co-owner of Dunkin' Donuts. "Hopefully next year we'll be able to do a theme doughnut for Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month, but we came on board too late this year."

The effort is led by Debbie Mills, captain of the Gail's Anatomy team and mother of the late Gail Mills, who died of the disease in 2007 at the age of 30. Gail manifested a syndrome of common, easily misdiagnosed symptoms such as fatigue, back pain, body aches and stomach problems as early as 2005, but the cancer wasn't found until an annual physical in 2007, by which time it had reached stage 3. Gail died four months after her diagnosis.

"I know if our roles were reversed, Gail would want to make something positive of it," Mills said. "Our whole goal when we started was to walk in the Relay, and it's really grown. In 2007 we did some things to raise awareness, and in 2008 we did more. This year it really is huge."

"I'm a practicing physical therapist in Evans, Ga., and Debbie Mills' good friend Lynn Sullivan is a patient of mine; I see her two or three times a week," said Dunkin' Donuts co-owner Kitsie Hartz. "We started talking about community involvement; I told her about our Dunkin' Donuts, and she asked if we knew Debbie. She told me about Gail's story, and it just touched me. We get a lot of requests for help with charity, and we can't do them all, but I just couldn't let this one go."

"I think the more you can make people aware of ovarian cancer, the more women can push for certain kinds of tests," she continued. "If you don't, it can develop and be incurable before you know it, like it did with Gail. You have to take charge of your own health."

More information about the Gail's Anatomy team's efforts to raise funds for cancer research and ovarian cancer awareness is available online at www.ovariancancerawareness4life.org.

Contact Suzanne Stone at ssone@aikenstandard.com.