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Local

Crohn's disease walk founders aim to reach \$250,000 goal

Stephanie Tracy, The Examiner

2006-10-23 09:00:00.0

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Columbia -

For Millersville resident Melissa Blood, lacing up her walking shoes for Sunday morning's charity walk for Crohn's disease was about more than just raising money to find a cure for the chronic condition.

"It's really good to be with other people who know what this is like," said Blood, who was diagnosed at 13 with the chronic intestinal disease that causes debilitating diarrhea, abdominal cramps and fatigue.

Blood, now 20, has had multiple surgeries to try to alleviate the condition, but has learned to live with a "quiet" disease that often prevents her from going to work.

Blood and hundreds of other walkers gathered Sunday morning at Columbia's Centennial Park for the fourth annual Miles for Miracles walk to benefit the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America.

The walk's founders, Carrie Gartner and Shayna Meliker, both 17 and from Ellicott City, hoped to raise \$15,000 at this year's event to bring their four-year fundraising total to \$250,000.

The two young women, friends since childhood, started the two-mile walk when they were in the eighth grade after learning about the plight of their Hebrew school teacher, who suffered from Crohn's disease.

In addition to all the normal activities of high school, Gartner and Meliker found time to recruit corporate sponsors and volunteers and solicit donations to make the walk a reality.

"We've learned how to plan," Meliker said.

"And we're not afraid to talk to adults, to pick up the phone, like we were that first year," Gartner added.

Gartner and Meliker, seniors at Centennial High School, said a committee will oversee the walk when they leave for college next year.

Gartner said she hopes to study nursing at the University of Delaware, while Meliker wants to pursue journalism, possibly at Northwestern University.

Robert Milanchus, regional executive director for the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America, said the Miles for Miracles walk typically funds at least one of the foundation's research projects each year, some of which are conducted at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda.

Milanchus said the walk started by Gartner and Meliker routinely raises twice as much money as the foundation's other annual walk, held in Towson.

The foundation estimates that about 1.4 million Americans suffer from inflammatory bowel diseases, a collection of chronic conditions that includes Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

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