

Celebrating Cancer Survivors During COVID-19

BY AMBER KAPOOR, MPH



National Cancer Survivors Day is an annual celebration of life for those who have survived cancer.¹ The day also serves as an inspiration for those who have been recently diagnosed with cancer, a gathering of support for families, and an outreach opportunity for the oncology community.¹ In the words of one survivor: “This day celebrates the heartache of being diagnosed, the courage we muster to get through the challenging times, and the countless healthcare workers who are by our side as we fight cancer. It also celebrates the family and friends who stand by us through the difficult days and provide kind words, hugs, and warm meals. It is a celebration of being given another day on Earth. It is a celebration of life.”

Middlesex Health is a community health system in Middletown, Conn., that includes a 275-bed hospital and two cancer center locations, and every year we look forward to celebrating National Cancer Survivors Day. Typically, we even begin planning the day’s festivities one year in advance.

Our celebrations usually include a brunch reception at a picturesque banquet facility on the bank of the Connecticut River. We try to include as many cancer survivors and guests as possible in the large ballroom and enjoy the fellowship, an engaging keynote speaker, heartfelt award presentations, and mimosas—a crowd favorite.

Our plans for 2020 were abruptly cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, we mailed 3D pop-up cards to survivors. Though the gesture was greatly appreciated by those who received a card,

we were disappointed that we had to celebrate this day separately. Though early 2021 showed some return to normalcy, a room filled with cancer survivors and their families was still not ideal. So, we had to forego our tradition once again.

Anyone working in healthcare, particularly those in oncology, knows that the pandemic has negatively impacted cancer care delivery in situations that were tough even during normal times. Visitor restrictions prevented caregivers from accompanying their loved ones to appointments where they could share the burden of difficult news or celebrate positive news. Fear of spreading COVID-19, especially to someone who is immuno-compromised, stopped community members from visiting the homes of those newly diagnosed with cancer to drop off a home-cooked meal or provide a shoulder to cry on. Makeshift barriers physically separated patients from one another, and virtual meetings marred by technical difficulties and user error (i.e., simply forgetting to mute and/or unmute) substituted in-person support groups. Masks, goggles, face shields, and social distancing requirements replaced the usual warm touch of healthcare providers and staff.

Needless to say, the pandemic robbed our patients with cancer of the support they needed and deserved in 2020. At Middlesex Health Cancer Center, we knew we could not let another year pass without an in-person celebration of all that our survivors and staff have endured. We were determined to bring people together again in a safe way.

Planning a Safe, Socially Distant Event

Inspired by the drive-through birthday, graduation, and other celebrations that became commonplace during the pandemic, a nurse navigator suggested that we hold a drive-through Survivors Day event. Our planning team loved the idea, and we began the planning process in late January 2020. Though we were all familiar with the concept, or perhaps had even participated in a drive-through celebration before, none of us had experience planning one. We were unsure of what to expect. We did not know how many survivors would show up or how long to schedule the event.

The ACCCeXchange discussion forum is our go-to resource for crowdsourcing ideas and to follow oncology-related topics. So, we posted on the exchange to garner guidance. Two ACCC member programs that had hosted similar celebrations responded to our posts, and after chatting with them, it sounded like we were on the right track.

Our first step was to select a theme. Many exciting ideas were offered, and we ultimately chose “Around the World.” Thankfully, our circular parking lot was the perfect fit for this event. Because no patients are seen in our building on Sundays, we were given permission to use the complex on June 6, 2021.

We knew there would be some heavy lifting required to bring our vision to life within just a couple of months, so we formed the following subcommittees:

- Invitations and marketing

- Signage
- Logistics
- Giveaways.

The full Survivors Day committee met monthly, and the subcommittees met more frequently as needed.

The invitations and marketing subcommittee worked with the health system’s marketing team to design invitations that looked like a passport page. We invited cancer survivors to join us on a tour around the world to celebrate their survivorship journey. Invitations were mailed to those on the cancer center’s mailing list and to patients listed in the tumor registry who were diagnosed with cancer in the past year. Invitations were also electronically distributed via various listservs, social media, and community calendars. The invitations and marketing subcommittee then designed an event map so that attendees could easily locate any department or staff member they might be looking for that day.

Each participating department—surgical, radiation, and medical oncology; radiology; and the cancer center’s support services and administration—chose a region of the world to represent. Our signage subcommittee used the graphics from the event invitation to create a large banner for the entrance, as well as banner stands that identified each department, their region of the world, and an inspirational quote that aligned with the theme. The signage subcommittee also made yard signs with arrows and an assortment of colored cancer survivor ribbons to guide attendees as they drove into the parking lot.

Historically, the banquet facility staff handled many of the details that ensured that our Survivors Day brunches ran smoothly, but with the drive-through celebration, our team faced a much heavier lift. The logistics subcommittee handled all details—large and small—including security; renting tents, tables, and a generator; hiring a photographer; booking a band; and coordinating a fire truck to park at the event entrance with a welcome banner.

The giveaway subcommittee coordinated



An astounding 100 Middlesex Health staff and community members volunteered their time to cheer on cancer survivors who attended the drive-through event.



A survivor is cheered on by Middlesex Health Radiology staff.



A cancer survivor stops to pose for a photo.



A survivor of breast cancer and her husband arrive at the drive-through event.



Surgical Oncology staff pose for a photo.



A survivor poses with her radiation mask.

souvenirs to give to event attendees that included a branded Survivors Day tumbler filled with curated goodies, branded survivor T-shirts, and Italian ice from a local food truck. To acknowledge volunteer efforts, this subcommittee also designed branded event staff T-shirts.

The Celebration

June 6 dawned hot and humid in Connecticut. Staff started setting up around 10:00 am, hustling to hang up all signage, set out tumblers and T-shirts, and decorate department tents before the event's start time at noon. At 12:00 pm on the dot, our first five cars entered the parking lot. We were off! Attendees made a quick stop at a registration station to give their name, receive a copy of the event map, and get a National Cancer Survivors Day pin. Each pin was customized to the individual and had their length of survivorship printed on it. Each participant then posed for a photo.

Following registration, the survivors drove in their cars through our medical complex, stopping at each department's station to be cheered on by staff, take photos, and receive a small, themed gift. For example, participants received a lei from a department representing the various tropical islands around the globe and a red, white, and blue star headband from a department representing the United States. Following the department stations, each survivor received their filled tumbler, T-shirt, and Italian ice—a much-needed cold treat given the heat!

The final attraction of the day was a live band. Attendees had the option to exit past the band or park and listen for however long they liked. In retrospect, we wished we had invited survivors to bring a lawn chair because this turned out to be a great way for attendees to enjoy themselves and the company of other survivors, while practicing social distancing. Even the survivors who thought they were “too old” to dance were eventually coaxed out of their cars by some of our most charismatic staff. Patients and their families had a blast boogying the afternoon away.

Survivors and Caregivers Respond

The response from the survivors and loved ones who attended our event was truly heartwarming. “My husband and I decorated our car with pink streamers,” one breast cancer survivor said. “My emotions were running high that day not knowing what to expect, having never attended anything like this before; never dreaming I would be one of the people that this was made for. As soon as we drove in, I was swept up in emotions. Tears filled my eyes as my husband and I drove by each of the groups cheering, clapping, and taking our picture. It was a feeling that I will never forget! Seeing other survivors there that day with their cars decorated, waving to everyone, beeping horns, celebrating life, enjoying an Italian ice, dancing to the band, or getting and giving hugs allowed me to feel wonderful! It’s so important for all of us cancer survivors to celebrate life.”

Another attendee shared similar thoughts. “As I drove around the building, hearing everyone cheering, whooping, and hollering, it dawned on me that this [event] was for me,” they said. “I was so overcome with emotion, feeling so much love from the kindest healthcare providers ever!”

Regarding the substitution of the drive-through event for our usual brunch, one survivor shared that “a celebration is a celebration. When times are better, we will go back to the luncheon. For now, this was the best! It was so much fun decorating the car and seeing all those smiling faces. I am

truly blessed to have been part of Survivors Day. Thank you for making us all feel special.”

Our staff unanimously agreed that this atypical event was a fun way to celebrate the different journeys of our survivors. Though the annual brunch is usually a celebration between survivors and staff, one of our favorite aspects of the drive-through event was that it enabled us to partner with our local community members and institutions to jointly support our cancer survivors. The local fire district, a longstanding and well-loved Italian ice vendor, a local band, and local contractors all took time out of their day to recognize our cancer survivors. Additionally, an astounding 100 community members and employees from across the health system volunteered their time on Survivors Day. We, along with our survivors, are so grateful for this outpouring of love and support.

At Middlesex Health Cancer Center we will continue to seek creative ways to meet the needs of our patients and the community. Our patients, like our staff, are Middlesex strong. Whether it be a cancer diagnosis, a pandemic, or other life-changing event, we will get through it *together*.

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Reference

1. National Cancer Survivors Day. About National Cancer Survivors Day. Available online at: <https://ncsd.org/about-us/>. Published 2021. Last accessed July 28, 2021. 



The Middlesex Health vice president dances with a cancer survivor.



A nurse navigator dances with a cancer survivor to the live band.