

PHILANTHROPY

Student participates in relay for first year as survivor

By Kristen Johnson
Features Editor

Megan Leis has participated in Relay for Life four times, but this year was her first as a cancer survivor.

While only about 100 people participated last year, at least 950 participants signed up for Saturday's evening of events. A total of \$53,000 has been collected in donations through Relay for Life 2008, while donations are still being accepted online.

Leis, a senior in the School of Health Sciences, grew up with a weak left arm. The difference compared to her right arm was not overly obvious, so she never considered the possibility of a serious health problem. After visiting a doctor her freshman year of high school in 2000, the difference in strength became known.

"I have a tumor in my spinal cord," Leis said.

The tumor, however, had always been benign. To shrink

the tumor, doctors took the necessary steps of radiation therapy in 2001, therefore leading to her future induced cancer.

"They told me to expect thyroid cancer," she said. "We knew there were risks, but the tumor took precedence."

When she received the tumor treatment, the radiation was directed to her upper spine area, which led the doctors to expect the thyroid being effected. The

>> See SURVIVOR, Page 4



Andrew Gatzka | Staff Photographer

Relay for Life participants walk around the track with energy drinks in hand Saturday night in Lambert Fieldhouse.

>> SURVIVOR

FROM PAGE 1

thyroid gland is located toward the front on the neck, below the mouth, and mainly controls the pace that the body burns energy.

Shortly before Christmas of 2006, the doctors saw a change in Leis' regular MRIs. She received many tests, such as a fine needle biopsy, where a small needle was inserted into the front of her neck with local anesthetic. The following

Monday morning, she received the results.

"I was lying in bed that morning, and the lady from the labs called me," Leis said. "She said it is thyroid cancer. I wasn't shocked, but what could I do but expect it and move on?"

As the cancer became a reality, Leis said she was frightened. Surgery was also a main cause of fear during her treatment.

"First you read on the Internet about what you have, and you realize that this could

be really, really bad," she said. "I was 21 years old. A 21-year-old is not supposed to have cancer."

As evident by the 2 inch thin scar across her throat, Leis had her thyroid removed in 2007. She then continued with thyroid treatment in the form of radioactive iodine. The thyroid is the only organ in the body that absorbs iodine, so the treatment would locate any remaining thyroid cancer cells that had spread and would kill them.

"It's actually pretty cool, how it works. But it doesn't have a good taste; it tastes like really flat Sprite, like a dirty taste," she said. "I couldn't be around anyone with a thyroid for at least a week, because my body was still admitting the radiation."

Presently, Leis is stable and in remission. She said Relay for Life did feel different this year, because she can relate to the other cancer survivors who also wore white sashes bearing the word 'Survivor.' Her team included 10 of her closest friends, who all supported her by staying through the event from 5 p.m. to 7 a.m.

"I've been through all her times in the hospital, and it's neat to see her getting into admitting that she's a cancer survivor," said Heather Robinson, Leis' cousin and Purdue graduate.