

77-year-old runner looks forward to event of lifetime

By Karrey Britt
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Photo by Richard Gwin

Dick Wilson, 77, a cancer survivor and avid runner, walks with his wife, JoAn Wilson. Dick will be participating in Lawrence's first Head for the Cure 5K Run & Walk on Sept. 13.

Dick Wilson, 77, has participated in hundreds of races during his lifetime.

Forty years later, he was part of a 2-mile relay team from Kansas that set an American record in the 60-69 age group at the National Masters Indoor Track and Field Championships.

As a senior at Kansas University, he won the Big 7 Conference 2-mile championship in track and was a member of the national championship cross-country team.

The basement room in his northwest Lawrence home is decorated with trophies, plaques, pictures and medals of his running accomplishments. He estimates there are more than 400 and they adorn most of the wall and shelf space.

Wilson plans to participate Sunday in a new 5K run-and-walk event in Lawrence, and although he won't be competing for another medal, Wilson knows it will be memorable.

"It's going to be special. No question about it," he said.

The event raises money for the Chris Anthony Brain Tumor Research Fund at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

"Hopefully, one of these days, we will find a cure and find the treatments that will be able to treat these tumors to the point that maybe down the road — our children and our grandchildren won't have to face this, and if they do, there will be a cure for it," Wilson said. "That is my prayer."

Wilson was diagnosed with glioblastoma, a malignant brain tumor, one year ago, after suffering headaches. He had surgery on Oct. 7 at Shawnee Mission Medical Center and the doctor was able to remove about 95 percent of the tumor.

Then, he had 35 days of radiation, followed by six months of chemotherapy treatment. He recently began a second round of chemotherapy.

"I am doing fine," he said.

The cancer has affected his peripheral vision and balance, but he is still able to jog and walk for two to three miles at a time and lift weights. He works out five or six days a week. In July, he walked the Fiesta Mexicana 5K in Topeka and won the overall men's division with a time of 37:40.

"Doctors have encouraged me to continue exercising as much as I feel like it because it's good for me psychologically as well as physically," Wilson said. "I get tired, but I feel better after doing it. I feel that by keeping my body strong, it might just help in fighting the cancer."

During her 53 years of marriage to Dick, JoAn Wilson said she was never a big fan of what she described as her husband's "tremendous dedication and discipline" to running.

"There was a time, frankly, when I resented that," she said.

Not anymore.

"After he got cancer and the way he has tolerated the treatment has just been outstanding and it's because of his great physical condition," she said. "So, now I've begun to appreciate all that he did."

The couple met during a physical education class at KU when JoAn picked Dick to be her social dancing partner.

“They had a lady’s choice one day and I looked around the room to find some tall guy and it happened to be Dick,” JoAn said laughing.

Today, the great-grandparents are taking one step at a time and appreciating every moment they have together.

“There is no cure for this,” Dick said. “So what you hope is that the radiation and chemotherapy is sufficient to keep the cancer from spreading and to keep it under control to extend life as long as it can. And in the meantime, hopefully, something else will be found — an additional treatment that will extend life even further.”