

# Running for Christina



RAE Principal, Kristin Harper and RAE Assistant Principal, Kristen Smith cross the finish line during the Nike Women's Marathon in San Francisco

## Alexander Elementary School Administrators Run for a Cure for Leukemia in Honor of a Katy Teacher

*Written by Tess Alfonsin*

**A** year ago, if you had asked Kristin Harper and Kristen Smith if they would be training for a half marathon and meeting their running club at the crack of dawn on Saturdays, they would have called you crazy. In fact, that is just one of three weekly runs the duo penciled in to their hectic schedules to prepare for the Nike Women's Marathon in San Francisco. The two followed a strict running regimen for six months to ensure their fitness goals were reached. Their inspiration to run came from more than just a desire to get fit, though.

Harper, the principal of Alexander Elementary, and Smith an assistant principal at RAE decided to participate in the fundraising run after one of their staff members, Christina Hague, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Friends and coworkers banded together in an act of solidarity to honor Hague, helping Harper and Smith raise over \$4,200 each for the cause.

### Learning the Diagnosis

Hague, who teaches first grade at RAE, had been experiencing extreme fatigue, shortness of breath, rapid heart rate, bruising, and severe anemia for roughly three weeks before she sought medical assistance. Rushed to the hospital in January 2009, she was in critical condition. Her specific blood disease, if left untreated, can be fatal within weeks if undetected. Hague was admitted into M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in downtown Houston and immediately began undergoing painful treatment for her diagnosis.

She was ultimately accepted into a clinical study which resulted in an intensive version of a pediatric regimen. As part of the study, Hague endured lumbar punctures, intrathecal chemotherapy in her spine, intravenous chemotherapy, and corticoid steroids, oftentimes with debilitating side effects including nausea, facial puffiness, and loss of hair. But despite what she calls “the bumps in the road,” Hague always remembered to look around and see what she was fighting for.

### The Strength of a Family's Support

Family, Hague vows, is what got her through her darkest days. She had only to gaze at her three young sons, Aidan, 7, Nicholas, 6, and Nigel, 3, to be motivated to fight even harder. They reminded her that every day is a gift, and her husband, Alexander was always by her side as her constant supporter and cheerleader. He even shaved his head when Hague's own hair was completely gone.

Hague's extended family often stepped in to help and lend their support in any way possible, too. Because chemo wipes out a patient's immune system, precautions had to be made when one of the kids became ill. Anytime one of the boys had a fever, cold, or virus, Hague's mom and dad let them stay at their house until they were better. Luckily, the loving grandparents live very close by, which made things much easier.

While she missed her sons during these times, she took everything in stride. Even the two weeks she spent in the hospital staving off pneumonia couldn't break her indomitable spirit. “Every day is a gift,” she says. “You get to fight the battle.”

### Preparing for the Big Race

While Hague was waging a war for her health, Harper and Smith also dug down deep in order to train and raise the necessary funds to make their first planned half marathon a success. The entire RAE community helped kick the fundraising off with the All for One, One for All family walk. Staff, students, and parents participated in the family walk around the Grand Lakes neighborhood. A candle fundraiser and direct donations helped raise even more than the collection goal.

Meanwhile, Smith and Harper were surprised to find that running regularly had begun to fit nicely into their lives. In fact, anytime Smith missed a regularly scheduled run, she found herself



After Christina lost her hair during chemotherapy, her husband, Alexander showed his support by shaving his head.



Alexander and Christina Hague with their sons, Nigel (standing), Aidan, and Nicholas

“craving” it. Harper also began to enjoy her workouts and says running is a time when she can tune out the world. Slowly building up endurance was paramount to their success, and soon, the duo was ready to take on the challenge.

### The Journey Toward a Cure

Six months of fundraising and physical training were all coming to fruition as they boarded the plane to San Francisco. Knowing that Hague planned to meet them there made the trip even more emotional for the school administrators. Hague is still touched by the fact that people really cared and stepped up to the plate. “Everyone takes my breath away,” she says. The night before the big race, she and her husband joined Harper and Smith for an inspiration dinner, solidifying their unity in the fight for Hague’s health.

The next day, Harper and Smith woke up early and began their journey to the finish line. As they ran through the streets of San Francisco together, they would sometimes talk and other times simply feast their eyes on the picturesque scenery. Jogging by historic sites like the Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory made the 13.1 miles of the race melt away. As soon as they spotted the finish line, they saw Hague waving her arms frantically and yelling, “Smith and Harper!” Already emotional, they held hands and, as if in a movie, ran together across the finish line.





Kristen Smith, Christina Hague, and Kristin Harper

### A Healthy and Happy Future

Today, Hague’s prognosis is good. She is responding to chemotherapy, it doesn’t appear as if she will require a bone marrow transplant, and her hair is even growing back enough to require her first haircut in years. She will need maintenance chemotherapy in a year and a half, but she is hoping for no relapse. After teaching school on a Wednesday only to find herself facing a serious diagnosis on a Friday more than a year ago, she has learned to keep praying, to keep her faith, and to keep her spirits up. The uplifting way she approaches life can be seen in everything she does and rubs off on all who know and love her. With her doctor’s approval, she has even started making visits to the gym. “Life is getting back to normal,” she says, grinning.

Harper and Smith both look forward to continuing to help raise funds and run for a cure for lymphoblastic leukemia. Both elementary administrators ran the Chromosome 18 Run, and Harper ran in honor of Hague again during the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society’s race in Alaska. “Savor the moments,” says Hague, reminding us all in her words and actions. And with two new heroes embodying that same spirit and supporting her, she faces many more healthy and happy years of inspiring others. **KM**


*TESS ALFONSIN is the proud mom of three boys, a wife of 16 years to her best friend, and a fifth-grade teacher in Katy.*

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