

COVER FEATURE

Creech Elementary Pink Divas Stephanie Nady, Tanya Castro, Kathy Boxleitner, and Donna Parker



Sam Gardner, pictured with his mother Janet, trained to run and walk in the Race for the Cure



Carly and Annabell participated in the Creech Elementary fundraisers

Pink Divas

Fighting Breast Cancer at Creech Elementary

by Melanie Saxton Photography by Suzi Issa

Breast cancer touches many lives in Katy, but it has hit the staff and faculty of Creech Elementary especially hard. Every year, for the last four years, someone at Creech has been diagnosed with the disease.



Chance and Tristan Duffy rode in the Tour de Pink in honor of the teachers at Creech Elementary



Creech teachers Amanda Olson, Esther Schramm, and Lori Moore

"In 2004, Penny Ducote, our financial clerk, was diagnosed," explains Elena Thrun, principal at Creech. "Patricia Paetow, our former principal who is now with Katy ISD administration, was diagnosed in 2005. In 2006, teacher Marylou Iovine was diagnosed. Finally, Lydia Taboda, a former custodian, was diagnosed in 2007."

Pink, Proud, and Proactive

"Having co-workers stricken with breast cancer affected me," explains Donna Parker, who founded the Pink Divas at Creech Elementary. "As a 5th grade math teacher, I wanted to fight back on behalf of my friends and colleagues." Not to mention, taking charge of her own close calls. Parker has undergone several biopsies for suspicious lumps. "There are four of us at Creech - four Pink Divas who care deeply," explains Parker. "Although we haven't had cancer, we are affected by those struggling with the disease. I knew there had to be a way to fundraise and put a spotlight on breast cancer at our campus."

It's Parker who thought up an October '08 fundraiser that inspired students and teachers, alike. "I found the pinkest plastic cups around. We involved our student council, had fun-filled, silly, morning announcements, and challenged students to fill those cups with coins! The kids responded, time and again!" In addition, teachers who donated \$5 to the cause were given a "Jeans Day" pass. Altogether, over \$1,900 has been raised during the 2008/2009 school year.

Meet the Pink Divas

Parker is joined by Katherine Boxleitner, Stephanie Nady, and Tanya Castro. Each Pink Diva is a student council sponsor. "We're like a family at Creech," says Boxleitner, a 3rd grade language arts teacher. "Many of us have worked together since the school opened. It's a sisterhood. It's personal. Our mission is to raise awareness within our campus and community. We all decided to support the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. Parents, teachers, and students all pledged money for every mile walked or ran."

Stephanie Nady, the third Pink Diva, teaches 4th grade language arts. "I became a Pink Diva in honor of my co-workers. The Susan G. Komen race was amazing," says Nady. "I was so moved, witnessing 30,000 people all surging in one direction, for one cause, toward one cure. It was powerful. You couldn't help but feel you were a part of something important."

"We found a second calling," says Tanya Castro, the fourth Pink Diva and a 4th grade math teacher. "With enough research and funding, a cure for breast cancer will be found. So we involved students, parents and staff. Everyone who walked, ran, and biked for the cure made a difference." Castro's mother-in-law and grandmother both faced breast cancer. "I ran the Komen in celebration of these two inspiring women and have made lifestyle changes in my family," says Castro.

Penny's Story

"I didn't have a clue that anything was wrong," says Penny Ducote, the first Creech employee to face breast cancer. "I felt the lump just two days after getting an exam and mammogram in 2004. I thought I had a clean bill of health. So you can imagine the shock."

Ducote was vigilant about her annual check ups and self-exams. But it wasn't until after her mammogram (which was done twice due to an out-of-focus, right-side film) and a jaunt down the stairs of her home that she discovered the lump. "We're not sure why it didn't show up earlier," says Ducote. "But all the sudden, there it was."

Penny Ducote, financial clerk at Creech Elementary, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004



Teachers Leila Bardaji, Debra Riviere, and Tanya Castro encourage student participation in fundraising for breast cancer



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Luke, Sam, and Cameron supported the cause, even if it did mean wearing some pink

Ducote called her husband, then her doctor. Within a week she was referred to a surgeon. She and her family went through the full spectrum of emotions. But Ducote never asked God 'Why?' "I knew God did not give me cancer. Rather, He gave me the tools I needed to deal with cancer, including support from my family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. It may sound odd, but the whole journey was positive. It was a battle, but I was surrounded by blessings."

Certain criteria define a course of treatment, including the size of the lump and the lymph nodes involved. "I was stage 2B. Fortunately for me, the medical community has done amazing things to combat side-effects. Their medicines and protocols worked. I was blessed, because I found a place where I liked the chemo nursing staff. That was so important. I had guidelines for eating and learned the hard way to stay away from buttery popcorn during chemotherapy."

When Patricia Paetow, who was Penny's campus principal at the time, was also diagnosed, Ducote realized that she had a personal mission. "I knew what I was supposed to do, and that was, and is, to support others and share my experiences."

Students Step Up

"We wanted to teach our kids through example," says Creech Principal Thrun. "There is a lot to be said for civic responsibility." Creech parent, Laura Duffy, agrees. "My sons, Chance and Tristan, joined the Tour de Pink with about 2,500 others from Houston and the surrounding areas. They rode their bicycles in honor of Penny Ducote, Marylou Iovine, and all others from Creech who have been affected by breast cancer."

Janet Gardner's son, Sam, also worked hard to battle the disease. "Sam ran and walked in the Race for the Cure. He actually trained for the event. We're impressed and proud of him and the example set at Creech Elementary." Gardner has had a lumpectomy and is anxiously praying about another lump that recently appeared. Thankfully, she is cancer-free and is considering genetic testing.

The Challenge

It's the hope of Creech Elementary staff and faculty that other Katy schools start their own Pink Diva groups. They also want to continue raising funds to fight the disease and find a cure. **KM**

MELANIE SAXTON is a local area writer and editor, community volunteer, and proud mom of daughter, Emily.