

# Curing cancer, one dribble at a time

## St. John's hoops players, fans help raise \$62K for disease research

by **Bryant Rodriguez**  
*Chronicle Contributor*

Who knew a simple dribble of a basketball could help make a difference in the life of a child battling cancer?

Over \$62,000 was raised for pediatric cancer research by St. John's University basketball fans last Saturday at the school's seventh annual Dribble for the Cure event, hosted at the Jamaica campus by the college's men's and women's hoops programs.

Much like the American Cancer Society's many Relay for Life walks, this year's Dribble for the Cure saw SJU students, athletes and supporters play games, share laughs and — of course — do laps around the school together while dribbling a basketball, all in the name of raising money for the Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation.

Founded by former star UCLA basketball player and cancer survivor John Vallely, Dribble for the Cure — already a tradition at the Los Angeles school — started at St. John's in 2011 with the help of former UCLA men's basketball coach Steve Lavin, who took over as coach of the Red Storm one year earlier.

Vallely has come to a handful of SJU events since then, this year included. And in his speech to the crowd last weekend, he said it wasn't his own battle with cancer that inspired his creation of the event. It was his daughter Erin's unsuccessful one.

"I had a child that was in a cancer fight from 1988 to '91," Vallely said. "Unfortunately, we lost her, so it has been my motivation to change the world for these children who are fighting for their lives."

Prior to the dribble around the St. John's campus, there were carnival-style games like ring toss for kids to play. Some children also got their face painted and played basketball with Johnny Thunderbird, the school's mascot. The St. John's pep band and cheerleaders also entertained as part of the festivities.

"Because of the tremendous support and generosity you have shown for Dribble for the Cure throughout the years, PCRf and Dr. Cairo's research has contributed to an increase in survival rates of childhood cancer and blood disorders," men's basketball head coach Chris Mullin told the hundreds of attendees. "We encourage all of you to continue your dedicated support of PCRf and Dribble for the Cure. We can make a difference."

"It's a great opportunity to give back to the community. The children are out here and we're celebrating a great cause," senior guard Tamesha Alexander added. "It means a lot to us to be a part of this. We're all about giving back and we love children."

Like Relay for Life, funds are raised by teams, which gather donations for the cause.

The top fundraising teams received

plaques to reward their efforts. These teams from first to third place were: Legendary Champions, Ariel's Space Jammers and Team Canada.

For one of the teams, Ariel's Space Jammers, the cause was personal.

The members walked in support of a lost family member, Ariel Farajollah, who passed away from brain cancer 10 years ago.

His relatives Diana, Mahnuz, Daniel and Dalia Yadegar walked in his memory and for the Farajollah family.

"This is our fourth year participating, it's for a great research effort and we believe in what they do," Daniel Yadegar said.

Also in attendance was Dr. Mitchell Cairo, a researcher at New York Medical College who specializes in children's genetic therapies and stem cell biology. Cairo has spent his career working to find new ways to treat pediatric cancers.

Proceeds raised support Dr. Cairo's research at the Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation Laboratory at Maria Fareri Children's Hospital and New York Medical College.

"We have had just a tremendous outpouring of support for the St. John's Dribble. Each year, the St. John's people outdo themselves," Cairo told attendees. "Our progress in pediatric cancer wouldn't be possible without the Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation."

Team Canada, from Toronto, came to support Dr. Cairo's research as former patients.

"He's just an amazing doctor and his research is so important," Denise Raymond said. "We traveled here specifically for him. We have hospitals in Canada using his research. We'd do anything for this man, he's phenomenal."

Over the years, St. John's and UCLA have raised nearly two million dollars for pediatric cancer research.

"We couldn't do it without this support, the percentage of research money is much lower than adult cancers," said Suzanne Braniecki, who works with Cairo. "It's foundations like this that are the reason that we can do the research that we do and that just moves it forward and the cure rates are higher."

"We see it every day in our clinic, the kids that are being affected by what we do," she continued. "They're able to have better medications and better chemotherapies. There's no words, really."

According to the Coalition Against Childhood Cancer, only 4 percent of National Institutes of Health funding goes toward pediatric cancer research.

"So little funding goes to pediatric cancer. Events like this help bring funding and awareness, which can hopefully lead to a cure," said attendee Lisa Heffron, who was at the event with her family.



Not only does this youngster wear Golden State Warriors star Steph Curry's jersey, he shoots like him too! Playing hoops was one of the ways Dribble for the Cure attendees passed the time at St. John's last weekend, all while raising money for cancer research. PHOTOS BY BRYANT RODRIGUEZ



Children write inspiring messages on a banner for those with cancer.



This young baller gets ready to cross up St. John's mascot Johnny Thunderbird.



St. John's athletes, faculty, students and fans raised over \$62,000 in conjunction with the Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation at the school's seventh annual Dribble for the Cure event, one of the more popular gatherings on the university's calendar every year.