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[Walk nets \\$2.4 mil for cancer research](#)

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by [Kaita White](#) - Nov. 11, 2012 08:49 PM

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More than a few men are wearing bedazzled bras, and dozens of women are in pink tutus around Vista Canyon Park in Ahwatukee Foothills. Music from the '50s floats through the "3-Day Diners," pink tents where volunteers in poodle skirts and "Pink Ladies" jackets hand out snacks.

This is the Saturday lunchtime pit stop on the Susan G. Komen 3-Day, a 60-mile walk to raise money and awareness in 14 cities from July through November. According to a Susan G. Komen spokeswoman, this year's Arizona 3-Day raised \$2.4 million.

This year's nearly 1,000 Arizona walkers traversed roughly 20 miles a day, passing through pit stops and cheering stations where "Walker Stalkers," community members who followed the walk just to cheer people on, often were dressed in costume and holding signs. In the evenings, the walkers camped together in pink tents, spending the nights sharing stories, watching the camp show and dancing.

Walker Melissa Lockard wasn't sure her feet would let her participate in the Saturday-night dance party.

"I will sit in a chair and do this," she said, shimmying her shoulders and laughing. Lockard is a breast-cancer survivor from Phoenix who first heard about the event from a friend in 2002.

"She said 'Hey, I heard about this 60-mile walk from San Jose to San Francisco; I think we should do it.' I seriously thought she was kidding," Lockard said.

They did the San Francisco walk to celebrate Lockard's fifth anniversary of being cancer-free and since then have cheered on all eight Arizona walks.

This year, though, Lockard is walking again, in celebration of her 15th anniversary.

"It's very ... 'encouraging' is too soft of a word," she said. "It kind of blows me away to realize that so many people are passionate about the cause and willing to put themselves through this every year."

Jim Hillmann has walked in all 14 of the 3-Days. Each walker must raise \$2,300, and Hillmann raised more than \$32,000 in a year to participate in every 3-Day in 2011.

Hillmann walks for his mother, who died of breast cancer in 2004. He first walked the 3-Day in 2008 after serendipitously hearing a Komen radio advertisement while driving.

"Once you walk it, it's a cliché, but it's hard to walk away," he said. "The first day we went on the walks, I was a couple hours out and it was like, 'This is a home.' "

During his first walk of 2011, in Boston, he met Zoie, a young girl whose mother had recently died of breast cancer. He took a photo of her holding a sign and crying on top of a hill and shared it on Facebook.

It went viral, he said. Members of the "3-Day community," as he calls it, messaged him from all over the country that day and have since worked together to send Zoie and her sisters Christmas gifts, replace their broken furnace and raise money to buy their mother a grave marker.

The community of "3-Dayers" is inexplicably strong, Hillmann said, bonded by a desire not only to fundraise to help find a cure but also to heal one another. Everyone wears buttons displaying who they're walking for or how many years they've been a survivor. Walkers constantly approach one another and immediately start sharing stories.

And while the walk sees a lot of tears, it garners just as much laughter. The walkers' messages to raise awareness are channeled through silly, playful mediums, like a Hello Kitty face in the shape of breasts or the popular "Save Second Base" slogan.

"To hear the stories of survival and hope and inspiration, it reminds you why we're crazy enough to take on this journey because you have to be a little bit crazy, in a good way," Janna Florie said, laughing.

Florie is a Mesa resident walking for the fourth year in a row. She walks in honor of her friend Michelle Berry, who was diagnosed in 2008 with Stage 3 breast cancer at 28 years old. Berry died in January.

Florie rubs the pink hair of Peanut Budda, the teddy bear sitting on her lap. The bear has "walked" every 3-Day this year on behalf of a woman named Amy, who is in hospice in Washington, D.C., with breast cancer. Amy wanted to walk every 3-Day but can't, Florie said, so the community has shipped the bear across the country, with a new person adopting the bear for every walk and posting photos of it online.

"Bless Facebook," Florie said. "It's a community and a family across the country."

Over the weekend, she and the walkers passed through Gilbert, Chandler, Phoenix and Tempe, ending at Scottsdale Stadium on Sunday afternoon for the closing ceremony, which Lockard said is the most emotional time of the whole walk.

"During the walk, a lot of times, you don't know who the survivors are, and then you see them walk in (carrying a flag). ... I've been there nine times, and it still makes me cry," Lockard said. "I'll be carrying a flag."

Next year's Arizona 3-Day will take place Nov. 8-10. Registration is now open at the3day.org.

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