

Running with spirit

Mary Lee Smaldone, (left) and her sister Lori Noel at the Freihofer's Run for Women last year. Noel died of brain cancer in February, and Smaldone will be running in her memory in this year's race on June 2. Photo Submitted.

By [Julie Cushine-Rigg](#)

CAPITAL DISTRICT — Lori Noel saw running as a way to stay in control of cancer, a way of “winning the battle,” and it served her well at last year’s Freihofer’s Run for Women, where she ran with her sister, Mary Lee Smaldone of Saratoga Springs.

While last year wasn’t the first time Smaldone participated in the race, it was Noel’s, and sadly it was also her last. She passed away in February after battling an aggressive form of brain cancer, glioblastoma multiforme.

But Smaldone won’t be running alone this year — she’ll have her sister’s spirit and memory.

“For me, Lori was an inspiration because she was dealing with so much but she always seemed really strong and she didn’t let it get the best of her. I feel this year, she is with me in spirit and helping me to be strong and helping me to reach my goal,” said Smaldone.

The 34th Freihofer’s Run for Women 5K race is set to take place on Saturday, June 2, at 10 a.m. at the Empire State Plaza. An expected 5,000 women are expected to participate.

Noel was living in Virginia with her husband Kevin and their two children, Jeremy and Justine, when she was diagnosed with cancer in October of 2007. According to Smaldone, around 12,000 people are diagnosed with the brain cancer every year.

Due to the effects of rigorous treatments, Noel eventually moved to Saratoga to be closer to her family, including Smaldone and their four siblings, each of who helped in her care.

Having never heard of the type of cancer she had, Noel wanted to bring attention to it, and had even contacted the Today Show and Good Morning America to raise

awareness. The sisters talked about possible causes of the cancer and according to Smaldone, her sister was convinced it was from a fall she sustained six months prior to being diagnosed. The tumor was found in the area where she had hit her head.

While enduring treatments in Boston and later Saratoga, Noel employed running in an effort to “do everything she could” to be healthy.

“In January 2011, we had a really rough winter. She started running and walking on the treadmill, and when the weather got nice she started running pretty regularly. By August ... she was running six miles a day,” said Smaldone.

Later in August she began “feeling strange,” and an MRI revealed devastating news. The tumor was growing at quickened rate. But still, she ran when she was able.

“I think she felt it gave her a sense of control and freedom ... she had so many treatments and doctor’s appointments. When she was out running, it took her away from all that and gave her a chance to feel normal ... almost like she was winning the battle.”

Smaldone believes it was her sister’s wish for her to enter the race this year. She wasn’t sure she was going to run, but she attended a women’s conference in March at Siena College with her sister-in-law, who picked up a flyer about the race and the associated Training Challenge. Smaldone signed up for the challenge and the race the next day.

Race Director George Regan said the Training Challenge began last year in order to help women train to run “from scratch.” The challenge organizes women into varying groups according to skill and fitness level and through weekly meetings at The Crossings in Colonie serves to build up their strength and endurance. On Saturdays, the Challenge also holds group runs at the Colonie Town Park.

Each group also has a media person involved with the training. Smaldon’s group includes Ann Hughes of Fox 23 News.

“Initially it was harder than I thought it was going to be, but it’s a great feeling to be running with so many other people who have a similar goal. It’s a great motivator,” said Smaldone.

In the first three weeks, we’re basically walking. ... Then you just gradually build up to running. ... We try to give a lot of support to the women. We have a nutritionist, an

injury prevention specialist, and professional trainers that actually do the training,” said Regan, who has been running since 1979.

“The race has a long history in the community. ... Women are coming to the sport more and more over the years. In the early days it was for every woman, there were six men. Today, it’s actually 50/50. For the shorter runs it’s 60 percent women, 40 percent men,” said Regan. “It’s really a celebration of women and women’s running.”

A number of charities and organizations are associated the run and the Community Walk that takes place after the race at 12:30 p.m. Charities include The Melodies Center for Cancer at the Children’s Hospital at Albany Medical Center and Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Capital Region, to name only a few. To date, \$1.5 million has been raised for charities through the race.

Smaldone feels everyone should “live each day fully because you do not know what’s coming your way.”

One of Noel’s dreams was to write a cookbook. In 2009 she had “Favorites of Friends and Family” published. A portion of the proceeds are donated to the National Brain Tumor Society. The book is still available for \$15. For more information on the book, contact Smaldone at mlsaziz@aol.com

For more information on the run, log on to freihofersrun.com.