

Walking for a cause: Fourth annual walk for sickle cell awareness held at Rock Spring Park

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - For four years, the **Sickle Cell Walk** has been held by **A Precious Organization** at **Rock Spring Park**, and it has grown with each incarnation.

The event's founder, **Tammy Smith**, started the organization after her daughter, **Precious**, was diagnosed with the sickle cell disease. Her daughter nearly died before being diagnosed with the disease, which causes red blood cells to morph into a crescent, or sickle, shape and get stuck in small blood vessels. This blockage inhibits blood flow,

which deprives tissues of oxygen and causes severe pain and tissue damage, according to www.apreciousorganization.org.

Smith holds the walk each year in the hopes of raising awareness for the genetically-inherited condition, which is diagnosed more than 200,000 times a year. Smith was happy with the amount of community support her walk received this year. She praised community support Saturday morning.

"I feel really, really good to see all the support this year," she said. "It started with my co-workers, my family and my friends. It has since spread across the community. I am thankful for the help I have received from the city and our elected officials."

Of the 554 shirts Smith ordered from **B and B Custom Tees**, Smith said all but 15 had been given away at the beginning of the walk.



"It's awesome," she said. "I'm so thankful for everyone who came out today to support us."

Walkers were able to utilize new sidewalks recently installed throughout the park. They were able to walk alongside the park by **College**, and turn at **Lovers' Lane** to return to the park's entrance. After the walk, people were able to gather and enjoy barbecued hot dogs, **Praise Dancers** from **Morning Star Baptist Church**, and hula hooping by Smith's daughter Tia.

Money raised by the walk goes to A Precious Organization to ensure people in the area afflicted with sickle cell are able to get the treatments they require. Smiths said the group meets every third Monday at the **YWCA** building at 6 p.m. She said she is also going to attend the **44th Annual National Sickle Cell Convention** in **Baltimore** at the end of September, and an upcoming one day conference in **Chicago**.

Several vendors also supported the walk Saturday, including Illinois **General Assembly Representative Dan Beiser (D-Alton)**. Beiser said he had been supporting the cause since Smith started it in 2013.

"I always have a presence here every year," he said. "I'm here to support this noble cause and bring awareness. We need constant support and research to combat this terrible disease. Tammy has done an excellent job of growing this event this year."

Alton mayoral candidate and self-described community activist **Joshua Young** also commended Smith's efforts. He was among the walkers Saturday morning.

"This is excellent," he said. "I came last year, but didn't walk. I love this for the sake of awareness and wellness and cultural importance. I know sickle cell is more prevalent in minority communities, and Tammy has done a lot to bring awareness."

Sickle cell is a disease most commonly associated with people of African descent, but it also affects people of Middle Eastern, Central and South American, Asian and Mediterranean descent. One in 12 African Americans carry the gene for sickle cell.

In order to pass sickle cell anemia to offspring, both parents must either have sickle cell anemia (two sickle cell genes) or sickle cell trait (one sickle cell gene), according to the **American Society of Hematology**.

Currently between 70,000-100,000 Americans have sickle cell anemia.

