

GREENACRES



Cancer patient Brian Thomas hugs Lisa Richman, executive director of the Richard David Kann Melanoma Foundation. The Okeehelée Middle School teacher was diagnosed with melanoma this spring and recently underwent surgery. The school held a 5-K run Saturday in his honor. TAYLOR JONES / THE PALM BEACH POST

Runners turn out for teacher

More than 400 take part in benefit 5K for teacher fighting cancer.

By Willie Howard
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About 400 students, teachers and friends came to Okeehelée Middle School this morning for a 5K run to benefit science teacher Brian Thomas — an avid runner and former track coach who was stricken with cancer this spring.

Thomas, 34, arrived in good spirits before the start of the race, hugging friends and former students and lifting his shirt to show a foot-long incision down the center of his chest where doctors removed a melanoma tumor about three weeks ago.

Thomas fired a small cannon to begin the race and touched the hands of runners as they trotted down the middle school track, picking up speed.

"I feel humbled that so many people would come out and care," Thomas said. "It

just feels great. It feels great to be loved."

Less than a year ago, Thomas led two former Okeehelée Middle School students and two other runners on a 1,700-mile relay run from the Greenacres middle school to his hometown in Lake Orion, Mich., to raise \$10,000 for the Colon Cancer Alliance.

The colon cancer benefit run was a tribute to Julie Greene, the middle school's media specialist who overcame colon cancer five years ago. Greene ran in Saturday's 5K race to benefit Thomas.

"It's just so crazy," she said. "He runs across the country for colon cancer and he has cancer."

Thomas, winner of a Dwyer Award in 2010 for excellence in teaching, has been resting at home since his surgery. He said he is "healing like Superman" and he hopes to return to the classroom in August or early next year.

Fellow teachers donated 121 sick days to Thomas so he would not miss a paycheck while he recovers. They've al-

so been selling T-shirts that read "BT...WARRIOR DOWN ... for now" to raise funds for Thomas and his family.

"When we feel a warrior's down, we circle the wagons," Principal David Samore said. "This is a really cool faculty. They really care for each other."

Joanne Moniger, president of the school's parent-teacher-student association, collected donations to benefit Thomas while runners stood in line to register for today's run. Moniger said her three sons had Thomas as a teacher.

"We're doing anything we can to help him," Moniger said. "He's one of the students' favorites."

Ramiro Melendez, a member of the Road Warriors team that ran to Michigan last summer, said he wouldn't have missed Saturday's benefit run for his former teacher and mentor.

"He's done a lot in my life," Melendez said. "He's inspired everyone here."

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