

Philly's Phinest profiles Heather Saler

By [Joe Vallee](#) at 3:34 am on Monday November 2, 2009

This is a rather exceptional edition of Philly's Phinest.

For those of you unfamiliar with Philly's Phinest or are visiting Philly2Philly.com for the first time, we profile those who are making a difference in their community. Sometimes, life has hit a rough patch for them that makes their stories or testimonies all the more awe-inspiring. Yes, it makes for good headlines. But that's not what it's about. These are the real heroes of everyday life. The ones who don't get the credit they deserve because their names aren't Ryan Howard or Chase Utley. Not that there's anything wrong with celebrating your successful baseball team, but this is reality. This is life.

This particular individual whom we are profiling continues to inspire and draw inspiration from everyone who has heard her story. What is even more impressive is the fact that she passed away just over a year ago.

Heather Saler lost her courageous five year battle with lung cancer in May 2008. Prior to her death, Heather was one of the first patient advocates of the [Lung Cancer Support Community](#) (LCSC). The LCSC was the first organization solely dedicated to giving support to anyone affected by lung cancer. Many have said that Heather's initiatives in regards to spreading awareness of her disease is what enabled the LCSC to team up with the [LUNGeivity Foundation](#)-an organization founded by lung cancer survivors in Chicago to increase funding for lung cancer research.

Shortly after her diagnosis in January 2003, Heather organized LUNGeivity's first fundraising walk in South Jersey. In its first year, the event raised \$31,000 for lung cancer research, and continues to grow more and more each year. Last year's event raised over \$90,000, and a quarter of a million dollars has been raised overall.

During her courageous battle, Heather made great strides in her effort to spread awareness about lung cancer. A non-smoker, Heather made it a point to emphasize that lung cancer is not just a disease of smokers. Approximately 50% of those diagnosed with lung cancer aren't smokers.

"After being diagnosed, Heather immediately realized there's quite a stigma attached to lung cancer," says Heather's brother, Scott Briggs. "Lung cancer is always associated with smoking, so there's a perception that someone has in a sense "brought it upon themselves"; Heather never smoked. Her doctors were never able to identify a root cause for her cancer, as is often the case with this disease. She was an advocate for educating the world on the realities of lung cancer, not the myths. She searched for ways to make a difference, and came upon the group Lungevity, which was helping put together walks around the country. There were no such events in South Jersey, so she pioneered the first. I believe there are now several events annually in NJ in various areas."

And on November 7th, 2009, the [6th Annual Heather Saler Lung Cancer Walk](#) will be held at Cooper River Park in Pennsauken, New Jersey. Year after year, the walk is gaining more notoriety, sponsors, and donations. According to Scott, there was no question of continuing the walk even after Heather's passing.

"There were four walks before Heather passed. Over that four year period, we built a large group of repeat sponsors, participants, and volunteers, so when she passed, there was never a question that the walk would continue on. Last year was the first walk without Heather there, making it a very emotional event. This year's event will be just as emotional, as she continues to be missed, as a sister, a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a friend. In her absence, several volunteers, including her husband Brad Saler, have stepped in to fill the void. My parents also play a driving role in securing donations, as do many of her friends and family."

Brad Saler's ultimate goal is to have a national awareness day for lung cancer. And with the support that his family is getting for Heather's Walk, it looks like that day may come sooner than later.

So while Heather Saler may not be here in spirit, it turns out she is making just as much of an impact after she left this world as she did when she lived in it.