

Light the Night celebrates cancer survivors, supporters, caregivers

BY DAVID BEARD

For the Dominion Post

MORGANTOWN — Cancer patients, cancer survivors, their supports and families and caregivers lit lanterns of white, red and gold Thursday evening for the 2026 Light the Night procession WVU Medicine Golisano Children's Hospital, the WVU Heart and Vascular Institute and Ruby Memorial Hospital.

Light the Night was put on by Golisano Children's and the WVU Cancer Institute, in partnership with Blood Cancer United — an organization that supports research, treatment, patients and their families.

The procession and ceremony that preceded it celebrated and honored patients, their families, and the medical teams, while also remembering those who have passed away. Survivors carried white lanterns, supporters carried red lanterns, and some carried gold lanterns meant to honor lost loved ones.

Dr. Ashkan Emadi, WVU Cancer Institute medical oncology chair, recognized the patients, families and caregivers along with Cancer Institute nurses, advanced practice providers, physicians and staff.

"I see every single day why we are here tonight," he said. "You don't need to travel anywhere else for



The Light the Night procession begins.

David Beard/The Dominion Post photos



world-class blood cancer care."

The institute provides the same level of clinical trials, treatment and research as any cancer center in the country, he said. And, "You have something more. You have a team that knows your name, that knows your family, and will walk beside you not just for a single appointment but your entire journey. ... You should never feel that better care exists far from home."

Dr. Ashley Meyer, a Children's pediatric oncologist, said her family moved to Morgantown in 2020. "It didn't take me long to fall in love with West Virginia. The people here are really special and they deserve the best care close to home."

September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, she said, and 400,000 children will be diagnosed with cancer this year, 15,000 of those in the U.S.

The cure rate is 85%, she said. "We've come a long way, and that may seem pretty good. But when you do the math, that means that tonight we'll be raising a lot of lanterns in remembrance, too."

Four survivors and patients shared their stories.

Carol Westfall of Teays Valley was already a breast cancer survivor when she went to the emergency room

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Rilee Alkire speaks during Light the Night on Thursday.

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on her 77th birthday, Dec. 23, 2025.

The ER visit led to a visit with her oncologist and testing revealed leukemia. She was referred to the WVU Cancer Institute, where Emadi told her she had a rare cancer: Only 500 people in the U.S. have it.

Emadi told her, she said, that she had only two to three months to live. But he put her in his clinical trial for an immune therapy only available at the Cancer Institute. She started Jan. 16 this year and she's currently the only person in the world in this trial. It continues through January 2027.

"This is where it's at, it's happening here," she said. "And I thank you so much for coming into my life. I'm just glad to be standing here today."

Oli Pierce, of Harper's Ferry, is in the adolescent and young adult program at Golisano Children's. She is also diagnosed with several other conditions, she said, but but blood work during an ER visit revealed leukemia. She was transferred to Morgantown immediately.

Now on her second chemotherapy regimen, she is in remission and has received a stem cell transplant from her sister. She's now 87 days post-transplant and will remain on an oral chemo treatment for two

years.

She has spent 162 days in Morgantown and is looking forward to returning home, she said. "My community is what has helped me get through my diagnosis. My treatment team has provided me with compassionate, fantastic care and is always there when I need them."

Timothy Whetzel was diagnosed with leukemia in September 2024 and was in remission by November. He had a stem cell transplant in June 2025 along with his last dose of chemotherapy.

"I want to give thanks to God," he said. "He gave me my doctors to heal me. And I want to thank my doctors."

His faith has played a prominent role in his recovery. "We've got to do a lot of praying, and talk to the Lord," he said.

He offered encouragement to others. "Don't ever give up. We can beat this. With the technology and the doctors, we can beat this now."

Rilee Alkire is in active treatment at Children's. She loves the therapy dogs who come to keep her company and give her comfort.

And she explained what Children's means to her. "Anytime I have to come to the hospital, I know that I'm going to receive the best possible care from the nurses and doctors that they can provide. I've had nothing but the best care at WVU Children's Hospital."



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Oli Pierce and her service dog, Magnus at Light the Night on Thursday