Allegany College of Maryland’s respiratory therapy class of 2013 is coordinating the area observance of the annual Great Strides walk, which raises funds to battle cystic fibrosis.

The event, scheduled Saturday, April 27, at Mountain Ridge High School, is dedicated to the memory of Mya Harris, a Frostburg resident who lost a life-long battle with cystic fibrosis last year.

A Beall Elementary School fourth-grader, she was 9 when she passed away at Johns Hopkins Hospital on May 30. She was the daughter of Hope and Jon Harris.

CF, a genetic disease affecting children and young adults, leads to chronic and life-threatening lung infections and impairment of the digestive system.

The ACM respiratory students are seeking tax-deductible donations to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, which sponsors the 25th annual Great Strides, the group’s largest fund-raiser.

Proceeds go toward CF Foundation-supported scientific research and for care of CF patients. Every day, approximately three Americans are born with CF, and at least one person with CF dies in this country.

Landmark gene therapy studies and clinical trials on new drug treatments are under way, according to the Foundation, which notes rising costs as research becomes more sophisticated and as new technologies are developed.

Leading the local effort is Linda Twigg, one of a handful of second-year respiratory students who have taken on the cystic fibrosis walk in fulfillment of their program’s community service requirement.

While previous student-coordinated Great Strides walks have been held at the ACM track, Twigg selected Mountain Ridge as the site to better recognize Mya and to accommodate her family, friends and supporters.

An artistic child who could create purses, bracelets and flowers from simple duct tape, Mya enjoyed dancing, including with the Frostburg Mini-Miners and Frostburg Cougars cheer squads.

Members of these units plan a balloon launch in Mya’s honor at the event, which begins at 8 a.m. with a half-hour registration period at the high school track.

Interest in the event has steadily grown since the idea was announced, Twigg observed.

"I anticipated a great turnout for the walk, but this has become a much larger project than expected,” she said. “Fortunately, many friends and family have offered their time to support this event."
Local businesses have added their support as well. About two-dozen have signed on as sponsors.

Twigg added: “My goal is to be part of this walk in the future and to see upcoming respiratory therapy students holding this event on a yearly basis.”

Area fundraising for cystic fibrosis research starts in advance of the Great Strides walk with “spirit” nights at two local restaurants, Mezzo's in Cumberland and CiCi’s Pizza in LaVale.

The event at the downtown Cumberland restaurant is from 5:30 to 10 p.m. Tuesday, April 23, while the one in LaVale is from 4 to 8 p.m. Thursday, April 25.

Arranged by Sharon Merling, a friend of the family, both spirit nights will be conducted in Mya Harris’s memory.

For more information on the effort contact ACM’s respiratory therapy program at 301-784-5521.

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