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Mt. Ararat cancels balloon release after community push back

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Mt. Ararat High School team members prepare to release their balloons last year. (Eric Maxim/The Times Record)

TOPSHAM — The Mt. Ararat field hockey team will not hold its traditional balloon release at this year's Drive Out Cancer tournament and fundraiser because of outcry from the community.

The tournament, set for Saturday at the Mt. Ararat Middle School fields, is a fundraiser to support the Maine Children's Cancer Program.

“This is a project which we hope instills a passion for serving in our student-athletes, one they will carry into their lives beyond high school,” the school wrote on its fundraising page. “As athletics plays an important role in the educational lives of our students, we feel compelled to give back to our communities in ways that allow students to demonstrate compassion, learning, service and integrity.”

Over the past four years, participants have been invited to remember loved ones who have passed from cancer by writing their names on biodegradable balloons and releasing them.

But by Monday afternoon, word had spread on social media about the balloon release, a practice that has been found to have lasting impacts on the environment, threatening birds and other wildlife when the balloons ultimately return to earth.

Even biodegradable balloons can take more than six months to degrade. California, Connecticut, Florida, Tennessee and Virginia already have laws banning or restricting balloon launches, and there are bills in the process of doing so in Maine, Arizona, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York and Rhode Island, according to an April Associated Press article.

People and organizations from around the state posted on Facebook, sent emails and letters to the editor asking Mt. Ararat to stop the release and protect the environment.

“How many of these balloons will end up in Merrymeeting Bay, where the second largest population of bald eagles in Maine lives,” Erin Macro, executive director of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay wondered on the group’s Facebook page. “A single piece of plastic can kill many members of a food chain, often slowly and painfully. ... We need to stop this balloon release.”

Plus, she said in an interview, many of the chemicals that leach out of plastic can cause cancer. “You can’t fight cancer with cancer,” she said.

Even Rep. Seth Berry weighed in online, and commended the young people for raising money for a worthy cause, but added that “it is time to end the release of balloons, as we now understand better than ever the harm balloons and other plastics are causing to human and ecosystem health. They look good for five minutes as they go up, but they don’t look good in the decades and centuries that follow. ... Let’s adapt with the times, and find new ways to fight cancer and promote health.”

Katie Barto, a cancer survivor who lives on a boat and sees the impacts of littering daily, said in an interview that she was “extremely frustrated by everyone hiding behind the excuse that it is to fight cancer.”

“People can do so many real things to help people battling cancer,” she said, such as donating to cancer research, knitting a hat or blanket, offering to cook a meal or clean a house for someone who is overwhelmed.

“Those are real things that help and not just some symbolic ‘feel good’ gesture,” she said. “It is great for these kids to do fundraisers and their hearts are in the right place but this isn’t the way to help.”

Others suggested blowing bubbles or flying kites if the team wanted to make a gesture.

“We are aware of the community’s concern with the tradition of releasing biodegradable balloons to honor lost loved ones,” members of the field hockey team said in a video statement posted to the Mt. Ararat High School Sports Facebook page late Monday night.

“We love the environment and it’s never been our intention to harm wildlife, which is why no balloons will be released at the tournament. The event is more important than any controversy surrounding it.”

Shawn Chabot, superintendent of MSAD 75, said in an interview that the team “just wanted to do good” and that it was “a good growing process.”

They showed a great deal of maturity in recognizing that they needed to do something different, he said, and handled themselves well in the midst of “a lot of negative feedback” that was often “mean-spirited.”

“They were more than willing to do the right thing,” he said. “The girls acted extremely maturely, it’s something to be really proud about. I wish some of the adults had acted the same way... I can understand people get passionate about the environment, (but) I don’t think we need to attack each other, we can have a conversation. We should all be proud of the kids on that team.”

Since the announcement, many have posted on social media thanking Mt. Ararat administration for canceling the balloon release. In an update on his page, Berry applauded the positive leadership of the field hockey team.

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“Despite some ill-informed attacks on them and their motives, the young women organizing this event listened, and adjusted plans like the leaders they are,” he wrote in one post.

“These student-athlete-leaders rock — and roll with the punches to make a good thing even better,” he posted in another. “They’ve raised over \$45K to help Drive out Cancer in Maine kids. Let’s help them soar even higher this year!”

As of Tuesday afternoon, the team had raised \$4,500 for this year’s tournament.

Those interested in making a donation can visit the fundraiser page at events.mmc.org/site/TR?fr_id=1280&pg=entry

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