

Cancer survivor meets a hero

Despite injury, bike tour with Lance Armstrong deemed a success

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PLAISTOW — Vanessa Underwood reached her goal without even crossing the finish line.

Underwood, a survivor of colon cancer who lives in Plaistow, signed up to bicycle 27 miles Oct. 9 in the final stretch of Lance Armstrong's Tour of Hope to raise money for cancer research. Underwood's sister, Grace Freije, and daughter, Caroline, also entered; they raised a combined \$4,000.

The trip was everything Underwood had hoped for and everything she didn't want at the same time.

In May 2003, Underwood was diagnosed with colon cancer and received radiation and chemotherapy every day for a month. The treatment shut down Underwood for the entire summer, but it did not shut down her positive attitude that she credits, along with support from her family, for getting her through the ordeal and forcing the cancer into remission.

A year later, Underwood was prepared to bicycle 27 miles to the White House to raise money for cancer research.

One of her goals was to meet fellow-cancer survivor Lance Armstrong, who was scheduled to complete the final stretch of the Tour of Hope with 1,500 other riders.

Underwood not only met Armstrong, she lined up to start the ride right next to him.

While in a sea of bicyclists waiting to start

the ride, Underwood heard over the loud-speaker, "Here comes Lance Armstrong!"

"I looked up and he was probably five yards away," Underwood said. "I said, 'Oh my god, it's now or never.'"

"So I went up to him and told him he is one of my heroes and an inspiration," she said. "He looked at me and smiled. Then, all the sudden, he turned focused."

Other bicyclists converged for a glimpse of the man who created the Tour of Hope and has inspired millions by overcoming adversity. Even if Underwood wanted to leave Armstrong's side, she was wedged next to him so tightly there was nowhere to go.

As the crowd dissipated, Underwood realized she was at the front row of the ride with 1,500 eager riders behind her and her daughter nowhere to be found.

"It was a little scary (at the front)," she said. "All these elite cyclists that I'm sure want to see Lance and I am right next to him ... I couldn't believe it."

But Underwood couldn't start the race without Caroline. She and Freije, who had been taking pictures of Underwood with Armstrong, looked for the bright yellow team shirts they had made especially for the race, with a list of the people they were riding for on the back. Little did they know Caroline had put on a sweatshirt and was already on her way to the White House.

Giving up their search, the sisters found a place at the end of the pack of cyclists to start the ride. But when Underwood got started, she heard, "Lady with the camera, watch out!" She looked up to see the bicyclist in front of her swerve and immediately hit her brakes.

The brakes locked up, and Underwood flew over her handlebars and face-first into the pavement.

"I just lied there," she said. "I could feel all the blood soaking my head and dripping down my arm."

Underwood said she wasn't sure whether she could move, but she slowly began to regain feeling in her toes and arms. An ambulance crew showed up and wrapped her head wounds.

Underwood spent most of the day at the hospital. She received four stitches in her eyebrow and three in her chin, a black eye and was unable to make a fist with one hand.

"I was so upset," she said. "All the planning, all the organizing, all the people that donated money and helped and all the excitement over being able to actually do it against my doctor's advice ... I was so disappointed."

As Freije stood by her sister, Caroline made it through the ride without any company, or water, or the knowledge that her mother was in a hospital bed. Caroline finished the 27 miles, wearing a shirt on which she'd written, "For Mom, my inspiration."

"I was so proud of her for finishing," Underwood said. "She did it for me, and I will be forever grateful and proud of her."

Despite her injuries, Underwood did get to meet the top cyclist in the world, with whom she felt an instant connection after reading his story of overcoming testicular cancer to win six Tour de France races.

"He gives a lot of people hope," she said. "When an athlete can look at a disease like a competition, as long as they're still breathing and there's still a chance you can't give up hope ... that's inspiring."



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