



Send to Printer

Back to Story

This page has been printed from the following URL:

<http://www.seacoastonline.com/2004news/rock/10082004/news/41966.htm>

12-4-2006

Survivor pedals to fight cancer

By Adam Leech

aleech@seacoastonline.com

PLAISTOW - Bicycling 27 miles will be nothing compared to Vanessa Underwood's last challenge.

Underwood was diagnosed with colon cancer in May 2003. In June of the same year, she received radiation and chemotherapy everyday for 30 days. On Saturday, a little more than a year later, Underwood, her daughter, Caroline, and her sister, Grace Freije, will ride 27 miles in Washington D.C. for the conclusion of Lance Armstrong's Tour of Hope. Combined, they have raised about \$4,000 for the Lance Armstrong Foundation, which will go to cancer research.

The area's **LARGEST & BEST** Real Estate site



Seacoast
Real Estate .com

The Tour of Hope national team, a group of 20 cyclists whose lives have been affected by cancer, began a 3,200-mile journey from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., on Oct. 1 in an effort to raise money for the foundation. Underwood and company will join the national team, along with 1,500 other riders, in the final stretch that will conclude in front of the White House, where Armstrong will meet them.

Underwood said it is important to her that she has family joining her because it was her family that gave her the positive attitude and persistence to force the cancer into remission.

Underwood was devastated the day she found out she had cancer. But as an athletic trainer and fervent competitor, Underwood decided to look at the cancer as another competition. A competition that her opponent must not win.

She had overcome illness once before. When she was 13 years old, a viral strep throat infection required a kidney transplant and her mother donated a kidney. Ten years later another transplant was needed and her sister Grace was happy to serve as a donor. At 49, Underwood was prepared to take on another disease head on.

"The competitive spirit doesn't die just because you get sick," she said. "It's like it's the enemy and you're not going to let it win."

Toward the end of her daily treatment Underwood was completely debilitated and would not see many people outside of her sisters, who traveled from Manchester every day, and her immediate family.

"It got pretty overwhelming. I was bed-ridden for



Vanessa Underwood, right, a cancer survivor, her daughter Caroline, 23, left and her sister, Grace Freije, will be riding in the final leg of Lance Armstrong's National Tour of Hope in Washington D.C., on Saturday.
Photo by Jamie Cohen

the entire summer (of 2003)," said Underwood. "My hair thinned, I lost a lot of weight ... I just looked like hell."

With four days left of chemotherapy, Underwood almost gave up. When Caroline came in to her bedroom to get her ready to travel to Boston for more treatment, Underwood informed her that she would not be going. Caroline wouldn't let her sick mother get off that easily and scolded her for even thinking of quitting when she had never quit anything in her life.

"I was pretty mad. I asked her what she thought another day of treatment was going to do," said Underwood. "She said, 'Maybe get four more cancer cells.'"

Whether tough love or tender love, Underwood got plenty of both and credits her family and friends for their kindness and for giving her the strength to make it through.

"People just came from everywhere," she said. "You can get through a lot of stuff when you have a lot of love and support around you."

When Billy Yout, a close friend of Underwood's, died of brain cancer earlier this year, Yout's son Brenden suggested Underwood ride with him in the Tour of Hope. Underwood agreed immediately and began reading about Armstrong.

In 1996, Lance Armstrong was diagnosed with testicular cancer that had moved to his lungs and his brain. At the age of 25, Armstrong was the top-ranked cyclist in the world and seemingly at the top of his game. Doctors gave him a 50 percent chance at recovery. In 1999, Armstrong not only recovered and was racing once again, he won the Tour de France. He has won the past five years as well.

Underwood found unmistakable similarities between the mind frame she had while overcoming the disease and that of Armstrong. She became an instant fan and a cyclist.

"He's amazing," she said. "The top surgeons in the world say he is a phenomenon."

"You just can't let (disease) slow you down and get to you. If you have a positive mind and believe you can get through it, you will," she said. "A brave heart can be a powerful weapon."

While in Washington D.C., Underwood is determined to meet Armstrong. She, her sister and her daughter will ride with the names of people Underwood has met who have been affected by cancer and have lent their support to her.

Underwood said she has signed up to be on Armstrong's national team next year. She said she is not sure what her odds of making the team are, but she wanted to at least put her name in.

"My mother always said, 'reach for the moon, the worst thing you can do is fall among the stars,'" she said.

And though she expects the 27 miles to be difficult, it will be nothing compared to her bout with cancer.

"The battle with cancer was a challenge," she said. "This is just the frosting on the cake."

To make a donation to the Lance Armstrong Foundation and sponsor Underwood in the Tour of Hope, e-mail Underwood at FITNESSA@aol.com.

To learn about Lance Armstrong and the Lance Armstrong Foundation, visit www.laf.org.

This page has been printed from the following URL:

<http://www.seacoastonline.com/2004news/rock/10082004/news/41966.htm>

Copyright 1999 - 2004 [Seacoast Newspapers](#), a division of [Ottaway Newspapers Inc.](#), all rights reserved.