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GET INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Cancer Is Her Cause

Inspired by Lance Armstrong, local architect helps survivors live strong



By Terry Kaufman
Local Heroes

Survival is a cause worth celebrating. On Sept. 17, that celebration will take place on the grounds of Helwig Winery in Amador County.

At an event called Triumph Uncorked, attendees will enjoy a picnic dinner and exceptional wines under the stars as they listen to a Bay Area jazz combo in the winery's outdoor amphitheater. For Pam Whitehead, who beat the odds to survive uterine cancer, the celebration will be especially sweet. Helwig Winery was designed by Sage Architecture, the firm that Whitehead and her husband, Paul Almond, started immediately following her diagnosis in 2000.

"It was a wake-up call for me," she says of her diagnosis. "The business came about because of the cancer."

Her cancer would have gone undetected but for the persistence of doctors. "I can't talk enough about how lucky I was," says Whitehead. "I was symptom-free, but a routine Pap smear showed an abnormality." Subsequent tests were normal, but the doctor wasn't satisfied and ordered the test that saved her life. After undergoing a radical hysterectomy at age 36, Whitehead read Lance Armstrong's book "It's Not About the Bike," a gift from her brother, in

three days. It was the springboard for changing hundreds of lives—starting with her own.

After establishing the business, Whitehead committed herself to improving the lives of other survivors. She was struck by the prevalence of cancer in society at large, as well as in her own family. Within a five-year period, five close relatives—her mother, father, stepmother, stepfather and stepbrother—received cancer



diagnoses. Armstrong's book motivated her to devote her energies to programs for cancer survivors, primarily through the Lance Armstrong Foundation, for which she raised more than \$200,000. In 2004, Whitehead won a \$5,000 award from the foundation, honoring her commitment as a volunteer. Lance Armstrong personally presented her with a check to fund a cancer survivorship program in her own community.

Thus, Triumph Fitness Program was born in 2005. In partnership with UC Davis Cancer Center, which administers the program, and Savvy Fitness of Folsom, which provides personal trainers, the program provides a 10-week intensive fitness regimen for cancer survivors. With



Pam Whitehead at Helwig Winery, where Triumph Uncorked will take place on Sept. 17.

Photos courtesy of Pam Whitehead.

sites in Folsom and West Sacramento, as well as a spinoff program in Modesto, the program has helped more than 500 survivors find the strength and stamina to move on with their post-cancer lives. "The survivors have great trepidation about what they can do following their treatment," says Whitehead. "They're still paying lots of bills for medical care, and many of them have never been inside of a gym." The program is offered to adult cancer survivors at no cost to them, and it is specifically tailored to their individual limitations.

It isn't cheap: It costs \$2,500 to put a group of six to eight survivors through the program, for a total of more than \$20,000 a year. At the same time that the need for such programs is skyrocketing, available

funds are shrinking dramatically. "The number of survivors out there is increasing, because survival rates are increasing," notes Whitehead, "but the budget for survivor programs at UC Davis has been radically slashed this year." In fact, money for the program comes entirely from donations, not from the university, and Whitehead has singlehandedly taken on the monumental task of raising funds. Over the years, she has organized bike races around Lake Natoma in partnership with Spokes of Hope and has led the Triumph Fitness team in the Davis Livestrong Challenge, a 20-mile bike race that supports the Lance Armstrong Foundation and raises awareness for the Triumph Fitness program. These events typically include many Triumph Fitness alumni.

LISA WIBLE WRIGHT

ATTORNEY AND MEDIATOR
FAMILY LAW

900 UNIVERSITY AVE., SUITE 101
SACRAMENTO, CA 95825

564-6262

Whitehead takes a special interest in each program participant, personally welcoming them to the first class and staying in touch with those who want to maintain the connection. "I can always see the tremendous changes at the last class," she says. "Their confidence level is just extraordinary. They feel so much better about everything. I tell them that they're now missionaries for the program."

Triumph Uncorked will be the biggest fundraiser that Whitehead has put together for the program. In addition to a concert and dinner, there

will be a silent auction and tour of the winery grounds. "It's such a unique property," she says. "There's nothing like it in this area." As she describes the panoramic view from the winery, Whitehead could well be describing the way survivors view their world after they have completed the Triumph Fitness program: boundless.

For more information about Triumph Fitness Program or for tickets to Triumph Uncorked, go to triumphfitnessprogram.com.

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