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# Battling cancer through fitness

**Two women's creation, the Cancer Community Renewal Project, brings its vision to a Vernonia bike ride**

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In one corner of Carol Lundin's cozy Goose Hollow apartment is a small shrine to her sister, Cathy, who died 16 years ago of breast cancer.

Across the room is a second shrine, this to a Labrador-mix named Ashley, who helped ease Lundin's own battle with breast cancer by forcing her to get outside and walk. Ashley was 18 -- venerable in dog years -- when Lundin had to have her put down last month.

The death of her sister was a catalyst in the creation of the Cancer Community Renewal Project, a small, grass-roots nonprofit organization run by Lundin and dedicated to helping people recovering from cancer. And it was Ashley's contribution -- bringing exercise, a sense of joy and dedication to Lundin when she felt rotten -- that epitomizes the project's goals.

"We have all that information, all that research, that physical activity improves the lives of cancer survivors," Lundin said. "Healing begins with inspiration, not just information."

In Pendleton, about 150 people have enjoyed yoga, massage therapy and health club memberships through the Cancer Community Renewal Project since it started seven years ago. The project will make its first real push in Western Oregon with "We Will Because We Can," a bike ride and retreat Saturday and Sunday in Vernonia.

Registration for the ride is closed, but Lundin said she hoped the event will raise awareness of the Cancer Community Renewal Project in the region and establish the project in Vernonia.

Lura Lee of Northeast Portland plans to ride with about 20 friends as Team GNO -- for Girls Night Out.

Lee, 49, finished radiation treatment for breast cancer just days ago.

"I was sitting in my oncologist's office with about a month to go on chemo and saw this little pink flier and thought, 'Hey, I need to do that,' " Lee said. "I e-mailed a bunch of friends and said, 'You can either ride with me or I'm going to hit you up for money.' "

Research shows that regular moderate exercise helps reduce the fatigue, nausea, depression and pain that can accompany cancer treatment. It also can reduce the risk of recurrence, as well as reducing the risk of ever being diagnosed with cancer.

Lee tried to work out daily during her treatment. She understood the importance of exercise during recovery to feeling better physically and emotionally.

"In one way, it was my way of saying this thing is not going to get the best of me," she said. "It was my belligerent way of getting even. I think it helped me through it. It really helped just to get out. To feel nature, fresh air. To get out and feel fairly normal."

A bike ride brought the 49-year-old Lundin to Portland from her native New Hampshire.

Her sister's death at 44 stunned Lundin. Cathy was 10 years older and had practically raised her younger sister. She left behind two sons. For years, Lundin carried grief and guilt. Why Cathy, why not me, she wondered.

She signed up for a breast cancer fundraiser, a bike ride through Colorado's Grand Tetons. She met several women from eastern Washington and Oregon, including Rebecca Hawkins, an oncology nurse practitioner who lived in Pendleton and worked at St. Mary Medical Center in Walla Walla.

The women talked about creating an organization that would help breast cancer survivors with retreats and healthful services such as yoga classes, massage therapy and access to exercise. And it had to be free, they agreed.

Lundin returned to New Hampshire and work as a special education teacher. But Hawkins kept pressing the idea of the nonprofit, and Lundin drew up the papers for the Breast Cancer Renewal Project. The first offering would be a four-day retreat in the Wallowa Mountains in August 2000.

"I called Becca and said, 'I want to raise awareness, so why don't I ride from my house to your house?' " Lundin said. The ride was dubbed "I Will Because I Can."

For 3,200 miles, 56 days and three flat tires, Lundin pedaled. She spoke about the project to all who would listen. Friends and supporters joined the ride. As the miles flew by, Lundin felt the grief of her sister's death ease.

"It was the rhythm," she said. "It was a healing momentum."

Sixteen survivors attended the first retreat, paid for with $12,000 raised by Lundin's ride and by fundraising in Pendleton.

The Eastern Oregon town gave the project its foundation. Lundin and Hawkins wanted the community to decide what it wanted, and how to raise money to provide it. All money raised stayed within the community.

One of the first actions was to open the project to all cancer survivors and change its name to the Cancer Community Renewal Project.

There were more retreats and bike tours on the Oregon coast, in Sisters and in Arizona.

"Anytime that you bring survivors together doing physical activity, there's something healing and empowering about it," Hawkins said. "After you've been through a cancer experience, you have to figure out how to put yourself together again. Part of that is doing something with other people who have been through it. And it's getting away from being a patient."

By 2003, Lundin was living in Oregon. She enrolled at Portland State University to pursue a master's degree in social work.

On June 10, 2004, she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"Ironically, when Carol and I started this, neither of us had cancer," said Hawkins, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2002. "Usually, people have cancer and then start something."

Lundin was training for a fundraising climb of Mount St. Helens. She underwent a mastectomy in July, put off chemotherapy until the late summer and did the climb with three other survivors.

"I started out as their facilitator, and they were the ones who got me to the top," Lundin said. "I understood how important those activities were and how critical it was for me to get to the top of Mount St. Helens. It was about control."

With the Cancer Community Renewal Project running in Pendleton -- it has an annual survivors fashion show and raised $20,000 last year through the Tough Enough to Wear Pink program at the Pendleton Round-Up -- Lundin wanted to expand the project. A bike ride and a healing retreat were combined in "We Will Because We Can," which will be staged at the Cedar Ridge Retreat Center and will feature massage therapy, yoga and movement classes, walking meditation, hula instruction and demonstration and a Native American drumming circle.

Lundin does not dream of the Cancer Community Renewal Project joining the ranks of mega-organizations such as the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation or the Lance Armstrong

Foundation. The project will remain small, funded and directed by the communities it serves, she said.

Cancer survivors in towns such as Vernonia surely could benefit from massage, yoga or a fitness trainer who could help devise workouts to regain strength and confidence, or volunteer buddies to encourage them to exercise, she said.

"I would like to see it be the organization that is known for creating healing options that inspire cancer survivors as they reach beyond their cancer treatment," Lundin said. "I want to be the organization that helps people recognize their own courage and resiliency."

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