Rise of the Phoenix

Cedarburg resident builds a healthy lifestyle after cancer treatment through local triathlete training program

By Sarah Rennick
Special to The News Graphic

The phoenix, a mythical bird that rises from fire and ash, is a symbol of enduring strength and beauty. It is fitting, therefore, that a 14-week triathlon training program in the metro Milwaukee area empowering women to rise above the ravages of cancer treatment into lifelong health and fitness is aptly named Team Phoenix.

One of its members, Cedarburg resident Dawn Nimtz, has worked hard over the last four years. Diagnosed with breast cancer in October 2014, she went through a rigorous treatment of pills, procedures and stamina testing.

Once in remission, she began volunteering with the organization after Breast Cancer Diagnosis. It was there Nimtz jokingly mentioned that she wanted to run a marathon. Her friend pointed her to Aurora Health Care’s Team Phoenix.

She attended an informational meeting in April 2017 and it was hooked.

Team Phoenix began to develop when a mesoactic breast cancer patient, Kim Stewart, approached breast oncology surgeon Judy A. Tobe, M.D., FACS, about a fitness program for patients deconditioned after surgery, chemotherapy and radiation.

Dr. Tobe, herself a triathlete, worked with professional triathlon coaches and athletic trainers to create a “prescribed” training regimen to follow with the goal of completing a sprint distance triathlon. She met with Stewart and cancer radiation specialist Dr. Lewis J. Waltie to build upon the concept.

Though research has shown exercise may increase length of life and overall survival in many types of cancer survivors, most cancer survivors do not meet the accracy and exercise guidelines of the American Cancer Society (150 minutes of light to moderate exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise per week),” said Waltie.

The team of fellow women encouraged and motivated one another through their Sunday and Wednesday group workouts. Nimtz, who admitted to not having one athletic bone in her body, was up at 6 a.m. every morning and headed to the Cedarburg High School pool to swim before work. “It was vigorous training,” she said.

On July 30, 2017, Team Phoenix swam, biked and ran to completion of the Tri for Children’s Triathlon at Ottawa State Park in Oconomowoc. Two weeks later, Nimtz did a 10-mile bike Tall Pines Bike Race, and another ride in December. Team Phoenix members past and present stay connected through Facebook, and when race options appear they jump at the chance to keep competing.

“We’re all making one another, ‘Who’s in?’” Nimtz said. “It’s changed all of us structurally.”

Waltie is awed by the change of attitude by participants once they embrace the challenges and reach small goals, moving to larger ones.

“It’s a slow transition, but the strength it takes to step into the humility of being out of shape, in remission, build and align everyone up — it changes his mind, too, maybe I can do this,” he said.

“One of the coolest things we see in so many of these women cancer survivors is an increase of confidence and empowerment,” Waltie said. “We teach them to set goals and think about what they thought they could never do, we expect them to see they are capable or more.”

“Cancer really takes so much from you in the beginning,” said Nimtz. “I consider going through Team Phoenix a support group.”

In between the struggle and exuberance of the road to recovered health, Team Phoenix has made all the difference.

“I’ve seen a lot of sadness with cancer,” Nimtz said, “but for me, personally, cancer has made me who I am today. It’s made me more of a strong person.”

Entering its eighth season, Team Phoenix is comprised of all women of various ages and stages of life. Nimtz was encouraged by the group camaraderie as they trained and spurred one another on to reach the goal of becoming a triathlete and move forward in confidence and embrace a life of consistent health.

And much of it would not be possible without the village of supporters along the way. “We are deeply grateful to all of our community sponsors and individual donors who make possible this life-changing program for our cancer survivors,” said Tobe.

According to Waltie, 75 to 80 percent of Team Phoenix graduates continue regular exercise, which has been observed through Aurora Research Institute’s collaborative research with Marquette University’s Department of Exercise Science. Together, they study the behavioral, physical and physiological effects of exercise training on these cancer survivors.

“Any woman who wants to do something for herself, this is the program,” said Nimtz. “It will make you stronger physically, mentally, emotionally — it’s going to help so many facets of life that you lost control of since the diagnosis.”

Since its inception, more than 200 patients now have completed the program, and women from all health programs, not just Aurora, are welcome to participate.

For details of the 2018 season, contact Team Phoenix director Lisa Hoffin at TeamPhoenix@aurora.org or visit...