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cover story:

A healing experience (page 10)

Learn about the first Survivor's Outdoor Experience retreat held at Olympic Park Institute

also inside:

- Peninsula College students take their environmental studies class to Salt Creek Farm
- Tips on how to use the leafy green, Swiss Chard
- Guidance for gardeners on avoiding injury

Healing experience in a serene setting



Photo by Paul Sauers

A group from the first ever Survivor's Outdoor Experience Retreat gathers during an interpretive hike led by a field instructor from Olympic Park Institute.

Retreats at Olympic Park Institute give folks diagnosed with cancer the opportunity to go from being a patient to being a survivor. >>>

The words that deliver the diagnosis may vary — “I’ve got some bad news,” or “It’s worse than we thought,” or even the direct method, “I’m afraid you have cancer,” — but they all boil down to the same thing: There is a disease to be fought, and that disease is cancer.

Jack Ganster heard a version of those words when the doctor told him that the growth in his head wasn’t benign as first thought, it was cancer.

At that moment, Jack decided he would be a survivor.

Seven years later, he uses the same motto for his nonprofit organization, Survivor’s Outdoor Experience (SOE).

“I always say that you become a survivor at the moment that you are told of your critical diagnosis. You do not need for a certain time period to elapse, nor do you need to wait for test results to become a ‘survivor,’” he says.

“I also know this is easier said than done.”

Jack started SOE with the goal to offer other cancer survivors and caregivers tools to help them cope with the disease, to think like a survivor and live life to the fullest, whatever the outcome from the disease.

In his quest to assist other cancer survivors through SOE, Jack has offered various workshops, presentations and, most recently, the Inaugural Healing Adventure Retreat.

The retreats are designed to provide folks who have been diagnosed with cancer the opportunity to go from being a patient to being a survivor through educational and outdoor programming.

“By learning about how to move forward living a healthy and active lifestyle, participants will be putting themselves in the best position to survive,” he says.

The inaugural three-day retreat was held at Olympic Park Institute (OPI), a venue that offers educational programming within Olympic National Park.

Jack chose OPI because of the beautiful, natural setting as well as for the ability to host lectures and presentations in a classroom setting.

A group of 16, eight cancer survivors and eight caregivers, was able to participate in activities that included journaling, wellness, nutrition and cooking, as well as exercise sessions. They also went hiking and paddled a group canoe.

Marie Marrs of Port Angeles is fighting breast cancer and was still in chemotherapy when she attended the retreat.

She learned of the retreat through another woman in her cancer support group.

As a member of OPI’s board and a former teacher, she knew the setting well.

“The campus on Lake Crescent is peaceful, cozy and beautiful — a perfect place for a renewal experience,” she says.

“I particularly liked the suggestion that our

‘significant caregiver’ come, too.”

Marie’s husband, John, also attended.

Led by an OPI staff member, participants went on a two-mile hike to Marymere Falls in the park.

One participant said it was the first time that she had been outside like that in two years.

Jack says, “This was when I realized that everything that I had been working towards was for real. She was so happy, so satisfied.”

Marie particularly enjoyed the boat ride.

“When we went out in the big canoe (all of us in one!), I didn’t have to paddle because my surgery had not fully healed. I just sat in the canoe and enjoyed the gorgeous morning ride on the lake,” she says.

SOE board member and cancer survivor Tim Smith attended the retreat with his wife, Michelle.

“When I was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer, I had recently heard about SOE. I knew Jack and got in touch with him. When I talked with him, it helped me get moving toward feeling like a survivor,” Tim says.

“Joining the board of SOE seemed like the next step. It felt like something I wanted to be part of.”

The camaraderie of the group was also important to Smith.

“The retreat was great. We really enjoyed ourselves. I was inspired not only by the hike, but by the other hikers. I look forward to more outdoor experiences,” he says.

Marie describes the weekend as both fun and nourishing.

“I came back exhausted, but ready to try new things I hadn’t considered before. I gained some self-confidence I had lost due to the side effects of my treatment. It was a wonderful weekend,” she says.

Comments like Marie’s make it all worthwhile for Jack.

“Seeing the way people responded and receiving the comments of appreciation made this a healing adventure for me,” he says.

Jack hopes to continue holding retreats along with additional workshops and presentations.

“As long as this disease exists, we should do what we can to make things better. I’m not in a position to bring about its demise, but I think we can provide support and inspiration through our actions,” he says.

Visit www.survivorsoutdoorexperience.org for more information.

Kathleen Ganster is a freelance writer based out of Pittsburgh, Pa.

She is also Jack Ganster’s sister and attended the Survivor’s Outdoor Experience Inaugural Healing Adventure Retreat in May.



Photo by Joe Streva

The group pauses for a break at Marymere Falls. In the front row from left are Marie Marrs, Jenny Steelquist, Dianna Maree, Fran Streva, Sky Heatherton and Candi Pitman. In the back row are Michelle and Tim Smith.



Photo by Paul Sauters

Dave Long of Oven Spoonful gives participants a healthy food demonstration.



Photo by Dave Pitman

Pat Flood of Olympic Acupuncture discusses “Healing Into Wholeness” during the retreat at Olympic Park Institute.

the next retreat

There are more Survivor’s Outdoor Experience retreats planned for the summer. If you’d like to learn more about signing up, phone Jack Ganster at 360-477-1619 or e-mail him at jhgisjack@yahoo.com.