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Hospital

Spotlight

From Supporter to Survivor, Rich Keeps Riding

Donors — thank you! Without your generosity to Closer to Free and Smilow Cancer Hospital, Rich would not have made it to the finish line!

HE'S BEEN A POWER CYCLIST SINCE HE STARTED RIDING FOR CLOSER TO FREE IN 2014, knocking out “century rides” (100-milers) nearly every year, becoming a more dedicated cyclist with each ride.

But all that changed in 2022, after Rich Neeb was diagnosed with an especially aggressive form of prostate cancer. That’s the year his status as a rider in Closer to Free changed from “supporter” to “survivor.”

“People tend to think prostate cancer is slow

growing, manageable, the best cancer to have,” says Rich. But, unfortunately, that’s not always the case, and Rich is one of the unlucky ones.

Since his diagnosis, Rich has endured more ups and downs in his physical health — some cancer-related, some treatment-related, and some unexplained — than most could bear. Two surgeries, two months of daily radiation therapy, and 24 months of double hormone therapy left him with ongoing chronic fatigue, overwhelming weakness,

(continued inside) 



Rich and his girlfriend, Aimee, before the ride. Aimee was not a cyclist before she met Rich, but she started training after he was diagnosed, as she wants to be ready to keep up with him when he gets better.

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nerve damage, brain fog, and pain.

The fatigue got so bad that Rich had to retire early from his career as a primary school teacher. There are days when he barely has the strength to get out of bed or even lift his arms above his shoulders.

Two things that work wonders for Rich

Yet, through it all, Rich somehow manages to maintain a positive outlook. “I really don’t feel good,” he says. “My body aches from the minute I get out of bed until the minute I go to sleep. But it feels better in my heart and mind to act — and be — happy. It’s the place I need to be.”

Two things help him hang on to that positive outlook.

The first is the Smilow Cancer Hospital community of providers who care for him, treat his disease and side effects, and make him feel less alone in his cancer journey.

Initially, Rich received care from a local hospital near his Southbury home, but it didn’t feel right to him. “I decided I wanted to go to Smilow instead,” he says. “I’d been riding and supporting Smilow for years. And from the minute I went there, I felt comfortable. Everything felt right and the teamwork among caregivers was top-notch.”

Just as important as Rich’s treatment is Smilow’s strong network of support for cancer patients. The Survivorship Clinic provides a team of expert clinicians in every specialty that could be important to a cancer patient — including

oncology, psychosocial support, nutrition, and physical therapy — and they have all been critical in helping Rich develop a strategy to rebuild his strength.

The Smilow Prostate Cancer Support group, an online group that meets twice a month, has also been key to Rich’s positive attitude. “It’s a chance to talk with others who are going through treatment about the weird symptoms, weakness, and difficulty getting out of bed in the morning,” says Rich. “It’s comforting to know you’re not alone.”

The other thing that helps Rich stay positive? Riding his bicycle.

It’s hard to believe, given the toll cancer has taken on his body, that Rich is up to riding his bike. But nothing could stop him from crossing that Closer to Free finish line with his girlfriend and riding buddies, even if he had to lower his riding goals.

In 2022, his first Closer to Free ride after his diagnosis, Rich rode 50 miles of the 100-mile route. A rest in the middle of the ride made it possible for him to start and end with his team. The next year brought the purchase of an electric pedal-assist bike, which enabled Rich to complete 26 miles. And just last year he rode 40 miles on the e-bike!

Rich finds riding completely exhausting, yet it inspires him so much. “I love the ride,” he says. “It feels good to be supporting the cause and it always feels good to be on my bike. I forget my troubles when I’m on the bike. **I think of positive thoughts and feel happy.**” ♥



← Gina, pictured on Hat Day 2024, with her former student Chloe.

Hat Day is especially meaningful for Chloe, who survived cancer as a baby. Gina and her students raise about \$3,000 on Hat Day each year for cancer research and patient care.

Turning heartbreak into help for cancer patients

GINA AND HER THREE SIBLINGS WERE BORN INTO A BIG, NOISY, LOVING ITALIAN FAMILY. Growing up, Sunday dinners were the priority every weekend. Gina, her sisters, and her younger brother showed up without fail for family time, pasta, and all the trimmings.

Gina, Nancy, Chip, and Mia stayed as close as can be into adulthood, sharing their love of music, sports, board games — and each other.

So, when Chip, a sportswriter for the New Haven Register (beloved for his weekly column, *Sunday Gravy*), was diagnosed with a rare, incurable cancer at age 46, his sisters and his mother, Shirley, were utterly devastated. The terrible news was made even tougher by a horrible sense of déjà vu — Gina's Dad, Lou, had passed

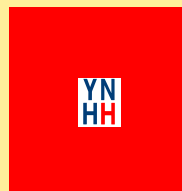
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Rich hasn't given up his goal to ride another 100-miler one day, but *he's still fighting.*

Your generous gift today will help him — and thousands of other cancer patients — cross the finish line. Make a gift today!

Visit givetoynhh.org/CTF25 to make a gift to the Closer to Free Fund for cancer care and research.

Or scan this code now: 



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away from cancer in 1991.

Gina and her sisters rallied to care for Chip. They took him to doctor's appointments, and when he had to stay in the hospital, they visited him every day. They played music — including Van Halen, one of Chip's favorites — and rocked out in his hospital room at Smilow. And when he needed it, Gina, Nancy, and Mia moved into his home to provide round-the-clock care.

When Chip passed away in August 2020, Gina longed for a positive way to channel her grief. She had ridden in Closer to Free the previous year, and one day while scrolling the CTF website, she noticed the featured list of Top Fundraisers.

"I recognized the names of many on that list," she remembers. "I knew exactly who they were riding for. That's what sealed it for me — I wanted my name at the top of that list because that's my brother's name, my father's name. And losing them both to cancer was too much to bear."

Getting creative for Chip

Participating in the CTF ride was a start, but it wouldn't get Gina to the top of the list. She knew she had to get creative. She began brainstorming fundraising ideas, and she hasn't stopped yet.

For starters, Gina organizes countless raffles for all sorts of prizes — YETI coolers filled with drinks,

gift cards and baskets from local businesses, or tickets to a music festival. The most popular prize is Mia's legendary homemade eggplant parmigiana. The price of a raffle ticket? Fifty-one dollars and fifty cents, in honor of the siblings' shared love of Van Halen and their famous album, "5150."

The sisters host an event each year at New England Brewing Company, the home base for Gina's CTF team. There's always a big crowd, live music, a raffle, and a silent auction.

The event that wins the cuteness prize is especially dear to Gina's heart. Each year, she hosts Hat Day at the elementary school in Orange, where she teaches first grade. For a donation of any amount, kids can wear their favorite hats to school on the Friday before the CTF ride.

So far, Gina has raised nearly \$100,000 for Smilow Cancer Hospital, and she's just getting started. "By now, people are ready for me, they see me coming," she says with a laugh. "They know I'm going to be fundraising for six months of the year, and that I'm going to come up with something new."

"It's my way of honoring him and keeping his memory alive," Gina says. "It's a way of paying tribute. Everyone at Smilow was so kind, so patient, so respectful, to Chip and to us. **We want to give back.**" ♥

CTF BY THE NUMBERS

Closer to Free 2024 was a record breaker! Here are the stats:

