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An Incredible Journey

BY KATHY LATOUR

The sign over the Amazon Heart table at the 2008 Young Survival Coalition Annual Conference read: "What if breast cancer was just the start of an incredible journey?"

For Colette Nichols, 42, the sentiment hit home. The year before, while attending the same meeting, she felt hopeful that the clinical trial using weekly doses of Avastin (bevacizumab) and Abraxane (paclitaxel reformulation) would work on her lung metastases from breast cancer. She endured side effects such as fatigue, neuropathy, and nosebleeds, but had just learned she was officially disease-free.

And something else had changed. Despite financial hardship that required moving into her parents' basement, Nichols had decided to live.

The motivator, she says, was a book called *Crazy Sexy Cancer* by Kris Carr, which detailed Carr's struggle with incurable cancer. Nichols says she started emulating the author by becoming "proactive," changing her diet and seeking acupuncture for her neuropathy.

"When people would say, 'I have gotten so many gifts from cancer,' I would say, 'bull,' " Nichols says. "But cancer did kick me in the 'arse' to make me realize that life is more than getting up in the morning and going to bed at night."

Ride a Motorcycle?

In early 2008 when Nichols stopped at the Amazon Heart table, she was immediately engaged by the organization's volunteer, who explained she was recruiting survivors to ride motorcycles from Los Angeles to San Francisco. The ride, she explained was in September—seven months away.

Nichols, a former teacher, told the woman she always wanted to ride but didn't know the first thing about it. Undeterred, the volunteer urged her to contact the Harley-Davidson dealership in her hometown of Baltimore to find out about classes to get her license.

Nichols did just that, sending an e-mail to the dealership when she returned home.

Nichols talked with Jean Neal, dealership manager for the Rider's Edge New Rider Course, who called Amazon Heart cofounder Megan Dwyer to better understand the ride. Neal explained that before committing to Nichols, the dealership wanted

to be sure they could support her all the way.

Overcoming Hurdles

When Nichols met Neal to schedule a class, she learned that even though it was only the first week of April, the classes were full into July, leaving Neal concerned that Nichols wouldn't have time to practice the required 1,000 miles before the September ride. While they chatted, Neal noticed a woman outside her office and excused herself.

The woman explained to Neal that she was registered for the following weekend's class on April 10 and had to cancel because she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and was undergoing radiation treatments. "Needless to say, Colette was put into her seat, and at that point I knew that Colette was sent to us for a reason," Neal says.

What Nichols now calls "the magic" continued. She needed to raise money to cover her expenses for the ride and wanted to raise \$5,000 for Amazon Heart, a challenge since she was living on disability. Tina Jarman, the dealership's public relations manager at the time, helped Nichols set up fundraising events, and Neal told Nichols' story to her service organization, The Loyal Order of Moose, which provided candy for Nichols to sell as well as a cash donation.

Nichols was also active, using the fundraising templates provided by Amazon Heart to send out letters, and she provided breast health information at events. Ultimately, Nichols received around \$5,000 in gear, classes, and funds from the dealership and another \$2,000 from Neal's efforts.

Lindy Hall, the Baltimore police officer who tested Nichols' class for their licenses, offered Nichols an extra bike she owned. Hall, Neal, and one of the dealership's instructors rode with Nichols to get her prepared.

Nichols says the ride became the light at the end of the tunnel, knowing full well that time was not on her side when it came to metastatic breast cancer. "It's not that I am a thrill seeker," Nichols says, "but I need to take that sense of living out loud and do it every day." Her new light is the 2009 Amazon Heart Thunder ride in Australia this May.

"I think my life is as beautiful today as it could be," Nichols says. "If I had to do it again, it's scary, but I think I would." She remains cancer-free.

Read more about Nichols' Amazon Heart experience at myspace.com/colettesjourney.