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# Warrior Survivors

BY KATHY LATOUR

*Breast cancer survivors heal on two wheels.*

Megan Dwyer, a triathlete from California, and Meredith Campbell, a fundraiser from Brisbane, Australia, should never have met. But a 2002 sailing competition in Sydney, Australia, brought them together, forming a friendship that resulted in a different kind of support for breast cancer survivors.

Dwyer and Campbell both survived breast cancer in their early 30s and agreed that women needed options for healing opportunities that would challenge them to grow while providing a social impact. The result: [Amazon Heart](#).

For the past five years, Amazon Heart has developed adventures for survivors that raise funds and awareness, such as hiking treks and motorcycle trips in California, the United Kingdom, and Australia; and social impact projects, such as constructing cottages for orphans in India. Providing experiences that combine a physical or personal challenge and peer support, Dwyer says the programs offer time for self-discovery in an environment where everyone speaks the same language about a shared experience.



Amazon Heart Thunder Ride 2008 took 20 survivors from Los Angeles to San Francisco. Photos courtesy of Amazon Heart.



A rider meets her motorcycle with glee (top). The author gives a thumbs up to the van drivers as they pass.

Women pay their own expenses and raise at least \$1,500 to either pay for the project or to support other organizations assisting young survivors. Campbell provides each woman fundraising templates and event ideas, saying that women often tell their stories for the first time during fundraising efforts.

In designing Amazon Heart, the women turned, in part, to Campbell's sister, Suzanne Chambers (Steginga), PhD, the director of research at the Cancer Council Queensland, who started the first support group for young breast cancer survivors in Australia. Her research confirmed what Dwyer and Campbell felt: Young survivors feel isolated, and their needs may not be met by traditional support services.

Chambers studied 21 women taking part in a 2005 Amazon Heart motorcycle

ride and found that “adventure events where women undertake emotional and physical challenge in an environment of group peer support provide opportunity for personal growth.” The findings will join the growing number of studies on post-traumatic growth when it appears later this year in the *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology*.

“It is the combination of a physical challenge in strong peer support that leads to the possibility of transformational change,” Chambers says.

## Motorcycles and Healing

Since 2004, 109 women have taken part in the Amazon Heart motorcycle excursions in partnership with Harley-Davidson Motor Company in the United States, Harley-Davidson Australia, and Harley-Davidson U.K., which make motorcycles available for the rides in each respective country.

Leslie Previs, women’s outreach manager for Harley--Davidson Motor Company, says when Dwyer and Campbell initially approached her, she thought it sounded like an amazing idea.

“Harley-Davidson was excited to support this event where the women come together and celebrate surviving and the freedom of the open road to celebrate life,” says Previs, adding that the company provides each rider a Harley-Davidson jacket to keep.

☒ These were women who I had never met who were saying the same things I had said and felt. I could see myself with them. ☒

—Alyssa Schiller

The Amazon Heart Thunder motorcycle ride in September 2008 brought together 20 breast cancer survivors, including two with metastatic disease, from eight states and the U.K. for a more than 800-mile ride from Los Angeles to San Francisco. The women, diagnosed between the ages of 29 and 53, included experienced riders as well as those who learned to ride for the event. Four participants drove two vans that hauled luggage and provided additional support, such as taking riders to eat in the evening and stopping for emergencies.



Amazon Heart 2008 riders came from eight states, the U.K., and Australia (author Kathy LaTour at far right).

## Living Out Loud

For Alyssa Schiller the ride fulfilled her need to connect with other young survivors. Schiller, diagnosed at 29, signed up after reading profiles of women

from past rides on the Amazon Heart website.

“These were women who I had never met who were saying the same things I had said and felt. I could see myself with them.”

A rider for more than a year at the time, the Oregon mother of three says she was surprised how the same fears, hopes, wants, and needs could come from such a diverse group. She says she ended the ride feeling inspired to live life to the fullest.

“I would never have done anything like this had it not been for the breast cancer,” says Schiller, now 32. “If breast cancer taught me anything, it’s that I deserve this.”



Alyssa Schiller (top row, center), diagnosed at 29, was the youngest rider.

Women are only required to be breast cancer survivors to take part in Amazon Heart excursions. Those with metastatic disease often do not include that information when applying, Dwyer says, fearing they will be turned down.

“Actually, they are first on the list,” Dwyer says. “We will do anything we can to manage this for all women.”

Stacy Thayer, RN, a survivor and psychiatric nurse from the San Francisco Bay Area, has been on all the U.S. rides since the group began and now serves on the board. She says that sometimes the change that occurs in a woman who takes part is immediate, but then there are others who appear not to have gotten anything from the ride—and then come back the next year to do it again.

In 2004 Thayer became friends with another rider when she found out they both collected shot glasses. After the ride they e-mailed and sent each other shot glasses. In one e-mail, she told Thayer about riding her new 2005 Harley-Davidson Softail Deluxe.

Thayer was shocked to hear that her friend died in January 2007 because no one knew she was sick. Thayer was even more surprised to learn that her friend had willed her the motorcycle—the one she was supposed to be riding. “There were only nine miles on it when it was delivered,” Thayer says.

Thayer rode the bike in the 2008 ride, keeping her passenger foot pegs down in memory of her friend.



Stacy Thayer, RN, rides the 2005 Harley-Davidson Softail Deluxe that was willed to her by a former rider.

## A New Perspective

Campbell says the ride is life-changing for those who seize the moment. “They want to not be the person who has cancer any more but the person who hikes through a mountain, rides motorcycles, or builds a building. It’s an opportunity to create a new identity in a short time. To be identified by your skills and not by

your cancer.”

Colette Nichols, one of the riders with metastatic disease, says she could forget about cancer while riding.

“I don’t think of the women from the ride as fellow cancer survivors but as fellow bikers—who happen to have had cancer,” Nichols says. “We were brought together by cancer, but that wasn’t what created the closeness. It was the ride.”

Dwyer and Campbell have helped similar groups start rides in New Zealand, and, after the Thunder Ride in California this fall, these groups will assume all the rides while Dwyer and Campbell design new adventures.