

Lance Armstrong's Hero Tag Applies to Jennifer: Scott Soshnick



Jennifer Linn stands with a check for \$1 million

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Truth be told, this column was supposed to be about that great athletic inspiration Lance Armstrong, the cycling supernova and cancer advocate who first whipped the tumors and then the competition.

Armstrong is pedaling, yet again, contending for what would be his eighth Tour de France title.

It's an amazing tale of triumph, grit, determination and will.

Here's another one for you.

It's the story of Jennifer Linn, who is also a cyclist, albeit of the indoor and stationary variety.

Armstrong says he rides for cancer survivors. Funny, but Jen says that particular term doesn't compute. She simply won't let it.

"I don't know what survivor really means," she told me the other day. "I'm a liver."

It's more than semantics.

It takes only a few seconds of conversation with this effervescent 38-year-old to recognize that Jen knows what she wants out of life. And, even better, she's intent on getting it. No matter the obstacles. No matter the doctors and their diagnoses. No matter the abdominal cancer that keeps coming back. Again and again and again and again.

Literally.

Living Goal

More than anything Jen, who runs the consumer marketing group at Nickelodeon, home of SpongeBob and Dora, wants to explore what's possible. Simply existing isn't enough. Living is the goal. Every day. Best she can.

I was introduced to Jen by the good folks at New York's Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, where surely, I figured, Armstrong must be a source of daily inspiration.

Instead I found inspiration in Jen, who had read Armstrong's book, "It's Not About the Bike," before beginning her first chemotherapy treatment.

The more we spoke, the more evident it became that what Armstrong is doing for others pales in comparison with what folks like Jen are doing for themselves.

"Early on I realized I have a choice in how I live," she says. "You either give up or fight like hell."

Great slogan. Perhaps Nike Inc. ought to give Jen a commercial.

Jen might not be a world-class athlete, but she doesn't miss a turn on the bike.

An hour on good days. Sometimes only minutes on bad days. Never skips it, though.

"I love, love, love to exercise," she says. "It's a good way to show you're alive, to push yourself."

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Chemo Fridays

Jen is always pushing, which is why she schedules chemotherapy treatments on Friday afternoons. That gives her the weekend to recover from any nausea and fatigue. You see, she doesn't want to miss work. Not a day.

Jen refuses to see herself as a statistic, which is probably a good thing since doctors gave her a 50-50 shot at beating the sarcoma that was found in her gut back in 2004.

Jen wakes up, assesses her condition and lives to the best of that day's abilities.

Living is a choice.

The good news about Jen's particular cancer, doctors say, is that it's treatable if it stays put. The bad news is that it's a pesky variety that leaves and comes back, leaves and comes back.

"I've never made it past 13 months," Jen says.

So far she's had four reoccurrences. And four major surgeries.

Jen has endured 30 months of intensive chemotherapy. All those needles, all those lines, as the nurses call them, have compromised her veins. That explains the port in her chest.

Finding Time

And still she finds the time and the energy to pump those pedals, which, like Armstrong, has become a vehicle for helping others.

Three years ago Jen founded Cycle for Survival, which has raised more than \$2 million, making it the most successful patient-run fundraiser in Memorial Sloan-Kettering's 125-year history. The next installment is scheduled for Jan. 31, 2010, in New York, and Feb. 6 in Chicago.

This woman just won't quit until so-called orphan cancers, rare types like the one she has, and that don't get much attention from pharmaceutical companies, are vanquished.

Jen's team is called the LiveStrong Linns, a play on Armstrong's ubiquitous slogan and yellow wristbands.

Something tells me that he'd be OK with the infringement. You can't trademark help and hope.

"Lance has put a face on cancer that says we want to continue living," Jen says.

A famous face.

Representing Everyone

Jen, meantime, represents the faceless. After all, she won't be sipping champagne while pedaling up the Champs-Elysees anytime soon. Maybe that's a good thing. Jen is the girl next door. She's your sister. She's your friend, not some world-class athlete with ungodly stamina. People can relate.

Fact is, all the things people say about Armstrong are easily applied to Jen, too.

She's a hero. A fighter. An advocate. A role model. A beacon.

Before we parted Jen asked if I thought Armstrong, who was in second place at the time, would win the Tour. I wouldn't bet against him, was my response.

"I understand that," Jen said.

Of course she does.

(Scott Soshnick is a Bloomberg News columnist. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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