

Bend Up Close: Sunnyside Sports Owner Looks at Sunny Side of Life Despite Health Challenges

by K_Guice

Talk to Gary Bonacker and it is easy to see that he has an amazing passion for life, his family, cycling and his shop Sunnyside Sports.

The 53-year-old shop co-owner has what most people dream of; a great business, a wonderful wife, Susan, and a precious nine-year-old little girl, Frankie.

He was content with where he was in life and what he was doing.

Gary Bonacker, co-owner of Sunnyside Sports (L) Lance Armstrong, (R) Gary Bonacker Then in 2003, Gary's world changed. Doctors discovered that Gary had brain cancer.

“I was diagnosed on July 31 in 2003,” he said. “I was having seizures and the neurologist did an MRI.”

It revealed that Gary had a tumor about the size of an egg on the mid-lobe of his brain.

After the biopsy came heart-breaking news, the tumor was malignant. What made the situation even more difficult was where the tumor was located.

It was in a part of the brain that affected all forms of communication which would make removing the entire

tumor impossible.

It is not surprising that the news sent the healthy 50-year-old man at the time into a tail spin.

“My initial thought was, “why me?” and then, “why not me?” is the next thing I asked myself,” Gary recalled.

“You know people say, “why does this happen to the good people?” and if you think about it, that doesn’t make any sense,” he pointed out. “Everyone is loved by someone.”

Gary quickly realized that kind of thinking was a waste of time. "I got over that part of it pretty quick. I wanted to move forward to look at reducing the size as much as they could."

So, in December of 2003, Gary had the surgery, part of which he says he was actually awake for.

"We could have done radiation but we chose not to," he said. "That is sort of in our back pocket."

The tumor is one that grows relatively slow; however that is not something that Gary chooses to even think about.

“I don’t dwell on if it is fast or slow,” he said. “I try to live each day to its fullest, regardless.”

Gary says people can dive into thinking about their cancer all the time, and while he slips into that once in a while, he chooses to just try to live his life.

He focuses on his work, his family and running special events, like the Tour des Chutes. It is an annual multi-distance cycling event that benefits the Lance Armstrong Foundation.

The event, which he created, has been extremely successful. “This year, we raised \$45,000 and had about 800 riders,” Gary said. “Last year, we raised about \$39,000.”

This year a portion of those funds raised will stay in Bend. “I wanted some of that money to stay here to go to the Cancer Treatment Center at St. Charles,” he said.

Gary strongly believes that research and survivorship programs, like those provided by Armstrong's foundation are key.

"A cure may not happen in my lifetime or in a next lifetime, but I feel like if the research stops it's never going to be there," Gary said.

That is why he decided to mix his passion for cycling with his new-found passion to create some good for those living with cancer.

His love for the sport goes back to his days as a kid. "I've cycled since I was in junior high and then I started racing as a junior competitor," he said.

He worked in cycling shops as a teenager, so it is no surprise that when he moved to Bend in 1972 after taking some courses at University of Oregon, he got a job at Sunnyside Sports.

"At that time there was Sunnyside Sports and I would just hang out," Gary said. He was later hired and was one of the owner's first employees.

“I stayed on forever,” he laughed. “Now, I am one of the owners and the original owners are no longer part of it.”

Gary said his daughter once summarized cycling best. “She said it gives you so much more freedom and she’s right,” he said.

“It is like your car when you are a kid,” he said excitedly. “It is freedom. You’re outdoors, not cooped up in a car and you feel the wind on face as you ride.”

However, it’s not solely riding that brings Gary joy. “There is the mechanic part of cycling as well and working on bikes,” he said. “For me it is a whole deal not just one part, I enjoy every part.”

While he realizes that there are a lot of other things he could do in life to make more money, he doesnâ€™t think the trade off would be worth it.

â€œWhat is your sanity worth?â€• he asked. â€œFor me there is no question. I wouldnâ€™t want to do anything else,â€• he added.

Looking towards the future Gary says he keeps things simple. â€œMy future is tomorrow and then the next day it is tomorrow,â€• he explained.

“To me that is a pretty good way to live in general and with cancer it is a good way for me,” Gary said.

While he looks farther into the future at times, Gary tries not to do it so much that it gets in the way of living today.

He says, “Living each day to its utmost and doing the same thing the next day, but doing a better job, is the best way I have found to truly live.”

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