

# For those facing cancer, a group ready to help

*Lance Armstrong, Local Contributor*

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When I first heard the words "you have cancer," I was shocked and devastated. It was 1996 and I had never won the Tour de France. I didn't even have insurance. I thought I would never ride a bike again – and worse, I thought I could die. That was the first blow. The second blow came when I had to deal with the sea of issues that follow a cancer diagnosis. The mounting bills and paperwork on top of the real fear of dying were overwhelming. It's the same feeling shared by many of the 1.5 million Americans diagnosed each year, 6,000 of them here in Austin.

Fighting cancer means navigating an unfamiliar world. A diagnosis quite often thrusts the patient and his family into situations they never imagined: insurance issues, questions about preserving their ability to have children, financial challenges and the need to connect with other survivors who can lend support and encouragement, all while fighting for their lives. In the Austin area alone, more than 10 percent of the population has received a cancer diagnosis. That means about 78,000 of us have faced these struggles. Particularly in underserved and minority communities, many feel they have nowhere to turn for help.

As I fought the disease, I was surrounded by a team that helped me through every challenge, whether medical, financial or emotional. My mom, my friends and several of my sponsors were there for me at every turn. They helped solve the problems, allowing me to focus on beating the disease and getting well again. Knowing that not everyone with cancer had that kind of team, I created a foundation to serve others facing what I was going through.

Today, Livestrong provides a team for anyone affected by cancer. Our free, confidential services are available in English and Spanish by phone, online and in person, right here in Austin. The Livestrong Cancer Navigation Center in East Austin is a place for those battling cancer, their loved ones, caregivers and health care providers to turn to when cancer enters their lives. They will receive one-on-one support to deal with insurance problems, treatment concerns or the emotional impact of the disease.

Our community-based navigation center is one of only two such facilities in the United States. We hope that someday, every community can provide the same kind of service, but until then, we're grateful to be able to pioneer a model in Austin that can serve others.

We opened our doors where we were needed most — in East Austin, an underserved Hispanic community where cancer hits harder and claims more lives. Almost half as many people with cancer in Austin are employed as those without cancer — 22 percent with cancer vs. 53 percent without cancer. Our goal is to help people and families fighting cancer throughout the Austin area overcome the tough challenges that arise after a diagnosis, during treatment and post-treatment by providing them with the direct services they need to live life on their own terms. For anyone affected by cancer, we are here for you.

Armstrong is a cancer survivor, champion cyclist and founder and chairman of LIVESTRONG. The LIVESTRONG Cancer Navigation Center provides free, confidential one-on-one support in English and Spanish. To learn more, visit <http://livestrong.org/Get-Help> or call 512-220-7777.

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