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Anso Thom

12 March 2010

They sat in little excited huddles of four around tables in the long, narrow hospital room. Some old, some younger, some still children. Many of them had bald heads, despite their young age, while others covered their hair loss with scarves.

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Most of them had never met before, but they discussed in excited tones the imminent arrival of their hero. Lance Armstrong is no ordinary man. He has made his mark in history as one of the greatest athletes ever to grace the earth. His feats at the toughest road cycle race in the world, the Tour de France are well known.

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But for the group gathered at Groote Schuur Hospital's radiation oncology ward there is only one reason why he is their hero. His brave and very public battle with cancer which comes with a healthy dose of "never give up" attitude has inspired cancer survivors across the world.

In Cape Town to support the JAG Foundation, ride the Argus Cycle Tour and promote efforts to destigmatise cancer, Armstrong negotiated the press throng in an attempt to spend some time engaging with the small group of cancer survivors - some of them already cured, others in the middle of painful and debilitating treatment and others only recently diagnosed.

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Relaxed and seemingly at ease, Armstrong entered the room dressed in a green LIVESTRONG t-shirt and pants, and patiently waited for the professor to complete his speech before addressing the gathering. "I only found out last night that this is a very famous hospital, thanks to the wonderful world of Wikipedia," he quipped.

"I have come to Cape Town to share my experiences, an obligation on a daily basis for me. The main thing for me is stigma and I understand it completely. I was a 25-year-old guy in Texas and the last thing I wanted to talk about was testicular cancer. The potential jokes, embarrassment and laughter were very real to me and for many people this stigma is a reality," he said.

Armstrong said it now felt "pretty normal" to be talking about cancer. "These survivors here are heroes to me and I hope someday I can come back here, sit in a chair and take pictures of you," he said.

Armstrong later moved among the group gathered and shook hands with individual patients. Carey McIntosh (17) beat cancer two years ago and is determined to beat it a second time around after her first round of chemotherapy last week.

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With piercing blue eyes and a white scarf tied around her head, the Wynberg Girls matric pupil describes cancer as "a scary word".

"It evokes fear and negative vibes for me, but the reality I know, is that it is no longer my enemy. We can walk together for a while, but not for long," she smiled.

Halfway through reading Armstrong's bestseller "It's not about the bike", McIntosh said he made her realise that she was a survivor and not a victim.

"It was strange to be able to meet such an icon, such a superstar. He is such a nice, down-to-earth guy and I think he is truly a hero for anyone who ever had

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cancer. I really think we all believe that if Lance can do it, so can we," said the determined and sprightly teenager.

Seated next to McIntosh was Jenny Heunis, a 40-something two-time cancer survivor and 10 times Argus alumni.

She credits Armstrong's book with her survival in her first bout with cancer ten years ago.

"I was on chemotherapy when I read his book and it was unbelievable for me. Reading how determined he was to ride his bike shortly after chemo inspired me to join the gym and even in the bath, shortly after the mastectomy, I was doing exercises.

"His attitude of not every giving up inspired me," said Heunis, who is a keen dragon boat rower and is a member of the breast cancer survivor team.

"Cancer doesn't deserve the big C title. I am definitely a survivor and it comes from Lance, I am a winner," said Heunis, displaying the iconic yellow LIVESTRONG armband.

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Professor Lynette Denny, head of the University of Cape Town's Obstetrician and Gynaecology Department lauded Armstrong for his attempts to destigmatise cancer and for placing the spotlight on the situation in Africa.

"Most people don't come for treatment or can't access treatment - it's a big issue in Africa," she said.

Denny said that only 20 out of the 52 African countries had proper treatment facilities for cancer while the people in the other countries "just die".

She credited the Lance Armstrong Foundation for their "fantastic work", for bringing together all the role-players in the fight against cancer and for pushing for a focus on stigma.

"Lance has been wonderful. He has no airs and graces and he has been warm and generous with his time. He is a wonderful man," said Denny.

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