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Live strong!

Last updated: Friday, March 12, 2010

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"Why's everyone getting so overexcited? He's just a man, not a god."

This unstarry-eyed comment came from a veteran cancer survivor beside me among the excited (yes, possibly a little overexcited) journos, medics and patients in Grootte Schuur's Oncology section this week, awaiting a visitation from the Prince of the Tarmac himself, cycling superstar and cancer warrior Lance Armstrong.

I belong to the they're-just-ordinary-mortals-like-rest-of-us school of celebrity-watching myself, but Lance easily charmed me and any other cynics in the room simply by entering it, looking indeed just like a man -- if a particularly fine specimen.

Dressed down in a "LIVESTRONG" T-shirt, Lance's brief speech was likewise informal and convincingly humble, aimed primarily at the patients present, who he said were the real heroes.



Photo: Carl Fourie

"Stigma is one of the biggest problems in Africa for people with cancer; you may hesitate to tell those around you when you're diagnosed because they have misconceptions about contagion, or even because they may laugh at you," said Lance.

He pointed out that this kind of prejudice needs to be fought in many other parts of the world too:

"I was diagnosed as a twenty-five-year old man in Texas, which, as regards the problem of stigma, has similarities with Africa. It's a very macho culture, and you may feel embarrassed, and fear there will be jokes and laughter -- especially as a young man with testicular cancer."

He shook hands, and chatted comfortably with patients, joking and commiserating as only a fellow-survivor truly has the right to do. "Don't worry, it'll grow back," he said to a young girl who'd lost her long blonde hair to chemotherapy: "it comes out again soft and fluffy."

When one of the medics present chirped up that he was planning to beat Lance in Sunday's race, he too got a humorous, but somewhat tarter response: "Oh really? Will you be riding a motorbike?"

Living strong in South Africa

Armstrong is in Cape Town this week to promote cancer awareness and participate in the Pick 'n Pay Argus Cycle Tour. His Grootte Schuur visit marked the launch of the

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LIVESTRONG Global Cancer Campaign in South Africa, which aims to end stigma and "turn cancer victims into cancer survivors."

The Live**STRONG** Campaign is run by the Live**STRONG** Foundation, founded by Armstrong in 1997 to fight cancer and champion the rights of the 28 million people world-wide living with the disease.

Cancer in SA: quick facts

Between 1993 and 2005, SA cancer deaths in women increased by more than 80%

Between 1993 and 2005, SA cancer deaths in men increased by 45%

Rates of cervical cancer incidence in SA are among the highest in Africa

(- Olivia Rose-Innes, Health24, March 2010)

References

LiveSTRONG Foundation. Press Release, 11 March 2010: *LiveSTRONG Global Campaign Launches in South Africa*

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