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The Lance Armstrong Foundation



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By *Mike Bundrant*

Most of us live in denial of our mortality and this denial comes at a price. Only a few among us, survivors of life-threatening diseases and other near death experiences, live with heightened awareness of the fragility of life. Having been close to the precipice, these few have no doubt about how precious life is.

Cyclist, Lance Armstrong, is a 7-time winner of the Tour de France and is one of those few. Sitting in a restaurant with a couple of friends in early 1997, after recovering from his death defying bout with cancer, Lance decided he needed to do something to help others in the fight for their lives against the disease that 1 in 2 men and 1 in 3 women will get before they die. Thus, the Lance Armstrong Foundation was conceived. Interestingly, this was before Lance skyrocketed to superstardom.

In an effort to raise global awareness and gain commitment to accelerate the battle against cancer, Lance announced to the world at the Clinton Global Initiative on September 24, 2008, that he would return to professional bike racing. Among his 2009 planned races is the Tour de France. Lance has remarked, "Of course I want to win an 8th Tour de France, but the most important issue is to take the global epidemic of cancer to a much bigger stage. That is the first priority here."

Present at the September 24th press conference was John Seffrin, Ph.D, President of the American Cancer Society, who said, "Cancer is potentially the most preventable and curable of all the life-threatening diseases facing humankind, yet if we don't intervene it will become the leading cause of death among all causes of death by 2010."

60% of all human cancer is preventable with lifestyle modifications

John Seffrin, PhD

President of the American Cancer Society

The day before the big announcement, I spoke on the phone with Doug Ulman, CEO of the Lance Armstrong Foundation. Doug is a cancer survivor himself, who is clear about his beliefs learned in childhood. According to Doug,

In a crowd, people push and shove, and elbow, and try to get ahead of one another. In a community, everyone knows that no one gets ahead unless everyone gets ahead.

It is with this paradigm that Doug leads the foundation with sights set on changing the face of cancer and leaving a legacy of hope and healing for

generations to come. Please enjoy part of our conversation.

HT: What can you tell me about Lance's return to cycling?

Doug: I can tell you this: Cancer is a huge problem. The Lance Armstrong Foundation has spent the last two years doing a lot of research around the world trying to figure out where we could play a role and where we can have an impact. Back in July, our board of directors reviewed the information and approved going forward with a plan to create an awareness campaign to reduce the stigma associated with cancer.

A couple of weeks later Lance rode in Leadville and started thinking about things. He thought maybe the best thing we can do for this cause would be to race around the world, making cancer awareness an explicit part of why. Lance plans to really ask people around the world, heads of state, organizations and others to join in and be a part of this. To make the commitment to what they would do in their county to eradicate the disease. That's kind of where we are headed and it's been terribly exciting in the last few weeks.

HT: He's still going to compete to win, right?

Doug: Absolutely. He's definitely going to compete to win, but as we talked to him at length, there's potential for an enormous legacy here. If we can change the face of this disease forever around the world...that's a profound impact.

HT: Can you tell me briefly about the origins of the foundation? I read his book, It's Not About the Bike, but, in your words, for our readers...

Doug: Yeah, sure. The organization was started in early 1997 and began at a dinner conversation at a restaurant, here in Austin. It was Lance and a couple of his friends. He had just finished his chemotherapy treatment and said, "Listen, we need to do something to help other people." Later that night they decided to put on a bike ride and that was really the start of the Foundation.

They weren't really sure what they would do with the money or what would happen, but they decided to try to raise some money and help some people. That was eleven years ago and the organization has really come a long way since then. I was not [with the Foundation] back then. The idea came to fruition before Lance even really knew whether he would ever race again or what his life would entail. Now to have watched it grow over eleven years and is really pretty incredible.

HT: That is interesting. It's not like he made it to superstardom and then decided, "Well, I've got nothing better to do with the money, so I'll do this." It was from the heart at the beginning.

Doug: Exactly. And also, had he waited until after he retired, the impact would have been so much smaller. For it to be during the major portion of his career made a real big difference. The organization started by funding testicular cancer research. Obviously, because that is what Lance had, then they expanded to urologic cancers.

Then when he came back to race again in 1999, they realized that his story was all about quality of life. Not only how can you survive the disease, but how can you return to have an incredible quality of life. At that time, we shifted the organization to focus on quality of life and what we call "survivorship" and we've just evolved over time. The beauty of the organization is that it's small enough and entrepreneurial enough to be able to attack new opportunities where we think we can have an impact and that's what we are going to do on the global scale.

HT: Why do you want to do this? Why did you choose this as part of your career path?

Doug: I was diagnosed with cancer when I was in college. I was an athlete –



a soccer player. I had a very rare form of sarcoma and then subsequent to that I actually had two different types of melanoma. This was all while I was nineteen years old. Ironically, that was about three months before Lance was diagnosed. I had started a foundation as a result of that. It was focused on young adults with cancer – 15 to 35 year olds and I ran that for a few years.

In late 1997 – I will never forget – I was in my dorm room in college and I got an e-mail from Lance and I didn't know who he was – I didn't follow cycling and I wasn't from Texas. He said, "Look, I just started the Lance Armstrong Foundation. I know you have your own organization. We're both athletes; if there is anything we can ever do together, let me know." So, for two years we just e-mailed back and forth. Then, in 2000, he said they were growing the organization, raising money and needed somebody to come and help us. So, I decided to move to Austin at that point. Sometimes things happen in life that you never expect and that's kind of how I ended up here.

HT: *So, you have your own personal story and motivation behind your involvement. That's great. What difference is the foundation making in the lives of others on a practical level?*

Doug: We've seen a huge shift in the mentality on cancer in the last ten years, from what used to be a somber feeling. Somebody would be diagnosed and someone in the support family would feel sorry for that person and say, "Oh, I'm so sorry. This is a terrible thing." We've seen a major shift to a more proactive, positive feeling of empowerment. The foundation has really been the driving force behind saying to people, "You know what? Even if you have cancer, you are in control of your life. You are in control of where you get your treatments. You are in control of how you wake up every morning." That positive energy has really caused a big shift.

Ultimately, our foundation believes that regardless of how old you are, the color of your skin or how high your income is, you have the same chance to have a high quality of life. Whether you call our 800 number when you are newly diagnosed, are looking for a clinical trial, financial assistance because your insurance won't cover your treatment, or looking for a support group, we believe that everyone should have access to all those components during the continuum of their experience.

One of the things we like to talk about is that we are not focused on the disease itself, we are focused on the individual. We focus the energy in our programs on helping people so they can have an optimal quality of life. We tell people all the time, "Your life will never be the same, but that doesn't mean if you've got six months or six years that you can't enjoy the rest of your life after a cancer diagnosis."

HT: *What I hear is most fundamentally is that it's an attitude or a paradigm shift that is going to drive the change. It's two different worlds if you think, "I'm gone," vs. "Okay, now what do I do?" You never know where the new paradigm is going to lead you – to which treatment, doctor or person? If you have the attitude that you are never going to give up, you never know what good will come of it.*

Doug: Absolutely. We've seen so much of that over the years. If nothing else, if we can inspire and empower people to live life on their own terms and forge ahead with that positive attitude and surround themselves with people who are supportive of their battle... I think that's a huge service.

HT: *So you are seeing people who are overcoming cancer and you're also seeing people, even if they don't overcome cancer, making the most of their last months or years?*

Doug: Absolutely. We hear from people all the time who, through our program, got into a clinical trial, for instance, that they never knew they could get into. They called, not knowing it was an option, and after looking into it, got into the clinical trial and ultimately are cured. If you hear one story like that, it's enough. If you hear multiple stories, it's pretty inspiring.

HT: *How do you reach the people who aren't thinking about this at all? What*

about those who live disease-free and are in denial of ever getting cancer in the first place? I would think reaching those people would be pretty important as well.

Doug: That's a great question. We know so much more today about how we can prevent cancer and how we can detect it early. That idea of denial is really important. I'll give you a statistic. We asked people about three years ago, when we did a public opinion survey, what they thought their chances of getting cancer were? The average response was *one in one hundred*. The actual statistics are *one in two* for men and *one in three* for women. It's the idea that, "It can't happen to me." Listen, I know first hand. It happened to me. I was as fit and as healthy as I had ever been.

HT: *And you were a kid.*

Doug: I was in college. I was nineteen, I never smoked and I got cancer. You just never know. Think about tobacco use. Think about exercise, lifestyle choices around eating. All of those things play a role. What Lance and the Foundation are able to do is reach those people. The young people... before they pick up a cigarette; reach people who may have watched their parents die of cancer and now may want to change their life.

Everyone is going to be affected by this disease either personally or within their family, but we know there are things we can do. Obviously, exercising and eliminating tobacco are two of the key components. I think that is where we have an advantage in Lance's visibility and the visibility of the Live Strong brand. It allows us to reach people we wouldn't ordinarily be able to reach.

To get involved in the fight against cancer, visit www.livestrong.org

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