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Learning how to live strong

By Rosie Molinary

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For so many of us, the worst thing we can imagine is a cancer diagnosis.

For Cindy McAlpin, her diagnosis of Stage 2 breast cancer in 2006 was actually the best thing that ever happened to her. As McAlpin, a 53-year-old mother, wife, and occupational therapist who lives in Mooresville, tells it, her need to be healed and transformed began long before her cancer diagnosis.

She's now finding that support through the LIVESTRONG program for cancer survivors at the Lowe's YMCA. Finding her way there, though, meant encountering many of life's biggest challenges.

"After the journey that I had, cancer was not the worst thing that has happened. It is the best thing that happened to me because it was through cancer that I found all of these wonderful resources that helped me to heal my life," says McAlpin.

In 1996, not long after McAlpin gave birth to her third child, Megan, the unthinkable happened. Megan passed away from medical complications after heart surgery. Looking for a new start, the McAlpins moved here from New Jersey. Then, a decade later, the McAlpins lost their oldest son in a tragic accident. Nine months later, McAlpin was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Like many people with a significant medical diagnosis, McAlpin immediately began researching where she could find support and help as she navigated a lumpectomy, chemotherapy, and radiation. Soon, she was learning to fly fish with Casting for Recovery, a non-profit that offers an opportunity for women whose lives have been profoundly affected by breast cancer to gather in a natural setting and learn the sport of fly fishing during a holistic retreat weekend. There, McAlpin learned about dragon boat racing, a team paddling sport done in traditional Chinese long boats.

"There was a group of women there from Charleston who were dragon boaters. They were so enthusiastic. It was something that I had to do. I couldn't find anything in the area, but I stored it away," McAlpin recalls.

A year later, McAlpin received news that a breast cancer survivor dragon boat team was being formed in the area with its practices at Ramsey Creek Park. She signed up. And, though, just as she suspected, dragon boat racing added so much to her life, she couldn't help but be disappointed with her endurance. Frustrated, she saw her doctors for advice. But their reaction didn't comfort her.

"They said it was no surprise that after what I had been through my stamina was gone and my metabolism was shot. They just accepted it, and they thought that I should be grateful for my life, but that wasn't acceptable to me," says McAlpin who returned to her computer to search for what else could help her. It was there that she discovered the LIVESTRONG at the YMCA program offered at the Lowe's YMCA.

"LIVESTRONG at the YMCA began with a collaboration between the YMCA of the USA and the Lance Armstrong Foundation which is now called LIVESTRONG, about three years ago, as a way for cancer

survivors to connect and engage safely in exercise and to help each other in their survivorship journey," says Kim Reilly, the program coordinator at the Lowe's YMCA.

Throughout the year, LIVESTRONG at the YMCA offers five eight-week sessions. Participants meet at the Lowe's YMCA three times per week twice for exercise including cardiovascular, strength and stretching exercises and once for group discussions and goal setting. The program is free to participants who do not need to be YMCA members to participate.

"We start participants where they can begin. Everyone is given an individual consultation, and they start where they are comfortable and then we move from there. Our goal is to show them over eight weeks how much better they can feel and how much stronger they can become," explains Reilly.

After talking with Reilly, McAlpin, who was not a YMCA member, thought that the program might be just the thing she needed to increase her strength and endurance and redefine her life post-cancer. She began the program in February of this year and quickly saw benefits.

"They expose you to so many things that something was bound to be of interest to you. Now I take exercise classes. I use the different exercise machines. I swim. And my dragon boat coach is so proud of me. In early April, when we returned to training and before he even knew what I had done, he said, "Cindy,