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The gift that uplifts

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By William Kenny

Times Staff Writer

When Marci Bossow Schankweiler lost her first husband, Peter Bossow, to cancer at age 30 in September 1999, it signaled the tragic demise of many things.

It meant the couple would never realize dreams like traveling the world, raising a family and spending their golden years in the intimate comfort of each other's company.

But even after the disease had shattered the young widow's future, it could not break her love for her husband or her drive to see that his death would not occur in vain.

Ten years later, Marci is remarried and has children of her own. And Peter lives on as well, through the cancer patient support organization that he and his bride conceived during the final months of his worldly existence.

On Thursday, April 23, Crossing the Finish Line will host the first major fund-raising event of its 10th-anniversary campaign, a dinner and fashion show featuring original Lily Pulitzer designs. It will start at 6 p.m. at Dolce Valley Forge, 301 W. DeKalb Pike, in King of Prussia.

Proceeds from the show, along with numerous other activities planned throughout the year, will help the Blue Bell-based organization send area cancer patients and their loved ones on excursions to the Jersey Shore, the Poconos, Florida and perhaps other locales.

Schankweiler does not consider the voyages vacations, but rather "respites" from the grueling treatment process and opportunities for families affected by cancer to reflect upon their lives together.

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

In the last decade, CFL has arranged and funded trips for hundreds of families and several thousand individuals, including more than 1,000 children. Depending on proceeds from fund-raisers, the organization hopes to sponsor 60 to 90 additional families.

"Having lived it, I know the pain of losing someone to cancer. But I know the joy of spending some time together before (Peter) passed away," Schankweiler said. "Pete is always there. And there have been so many other families since then."

After Peter's diagnosis, friends organized a beef 'n' beer benefit that enabled the couple to take a trip to the Caribbean. Peter used the phrase "crossing

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the finish line" to describe how he felt about completing his own chemotherapy.

Barbara Petrowski, of Chalfont, Pa., and her family were CFL's first official travelers in July 2000. Petrowski, her husband John and their son Johnny, then 8, stayed for a week at a donated house in Sea Isle City, N.J. The organization also paid their expenses.

"Ultimately, you want them to have a very enriching experience," Schankweiler said. "We outline the activities that are available."

Families also get comforting perks like welcome baskets, bathrobes and disposable cameras so they can photograph the trip. Upon their return, Crossing the Finish Line will compile the snapshots on a DVD.

Rhawnhurst's Kevin Carpenter, his wife, their two children and a niece experienced the same kind of trip last September, five months after Carpenter's cancer diagnosis.

"It was incredible. It was overwhelming," he said. "I look at it as I recovered from the chemo and then they helped my family recover from 'cancer.'"

Carpenter noted that cancer often hurts families financially, as well as physically and emotionally.

Medical expenses soar at the same time that income can take a major hit. So CFL might be the only way they could afford to travel.

VOLUNTEERS MEAN A LOT

Schankweiler looks no further than the hundreds of volunteers and countless contributors to explain the sustainability and growth of the organization.

"In the beginning, I don't know that I knew what I was getting myself into," she said. "Over time, it just developed. In the beginning, we really did fly by the seat of our pants. Now we have goals and objectives. We track statistics about patients and families."

The fashion-show committee, for example, has about 40 volunteers, many of whom return year after year, like Jeanne Dolaway. Dolaway's daughter and Peter Bossow were schoolmates as youngsters.

"She volunteered to do decorations for centerpieces for the first fashion show. That was the first function they ever had," Dolaway said.

The younger Dolaway in turn recruited her mom.

"Right now, it's a first-class fashion show. We're having professional models, cancer patients in honor of the tenth anniversary, and children in it, too," Dolaway said.

Featured designers in recent years have included Jones of New York, Nicole Miller and Gene London.

Unfortunately, Schankweiler explained, cancer affects so many people from all walks of life that there never seems to be a shortage of those who want to help.

The founder and her staff distribute monthly e-newsletters to everyone on their contact list. Each publication has the story of another family that CFL has helped.

"It's the (story of the) family next door that needs help," Schankweiler said. "It was a grassroots family charity in the beginning, and in a way it still is."

Other annual fund-raisers include a fishing tournament in Sea Isle City and a formal gala. Tickets to the fashion show are available for \$75 each until April 15.

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Visit www.crossingthefinishline.org or call 215-643-3346 for information.

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