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Jenice Armstrong: Crossing the Finish Line helps with the suffering



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THE **DUEMLERS** were small-business owners raising their kids in northern Montgomery County when they were walloped with the news: **Dave Duemler** had stage IV colon cancer. It was a staggering blow for a 42-year-old previously healthy man. The next nine months were arduous, as Dave underwent chemotherapy. Cancer had unexpectedly reached in and taken an insidious grip over all of their lives and they were powerless to stop it. Dave's wife and two daughters were frantic with worry, as Dave battled nausea, pain and fatigue. There were weekly, two-hour drives to Fox Chase Cancer Center. Those who have been through this kind of thing know that calling it an awful experience is an understatement.

Then, unexpectedly, the Duemlers were offered a brief respite in the form of a free trip to Disney World. Crossing the Finish Line, a small Blue Bell-based nonprofit that they'd never heard of, was willing to make all the arrangements, including buying four airline tickets and putting the family up in a house. All the Duemlers had to do was get on a plane. The family went for it. For a week the Duemlers did their best to forget about cancer and the specter of death that awaited them at home.

While in Florida, they splashed in their own pool with an inflatable Shamu and visited Disney World, Universal Studios and Sea World. Before leaving Orlando, Dave bought both of his daughters a Disney wristwatch and told them to remember him when they looked at it. He died in February. One of the watches stopped working, but the girls still have them - and memories of that special vacation.

With terminal illnesses, it's easy to get so wrapped up in battling the disease that patients and

caretakers alike can overlook the fact that life is happening and that there's still joy to be found. Having gone through this myself, I know people sometimes need to be reminded to make space for good times. **Marci Bossow Schankweiler**, executive director of Crossing the Finish Line, learned this lesson nearly 10 years ago when facing her husband's health crisis. Like Dave Duemler, **Peter R. Bossow Jr.** was young - just 30 - when he was diagnosed with late-stage testicular cancer. Stunned friends organized a beef-and-beer and afterward handed him a debit card with the earnings from the fundraiser. The couple, who had met in high school, were told to use it for whatever they wanted.

"It was his idea to really kind of go away," Marci recalled. "He said, 'Let's just go. What do we have to lose?' We went away. We just loved it. He loved to sail and his uncle had a sailing boat in the Caribbean . . . There were no phones. No television. Nothing. It was being together, laughing, loving and that's all it was."

Back at home again, the doctor's visits started up again. When a physician mentioned his high glucose level, Peter joked, "It must have been all those fruity rum drinks." Through those last few months, the Bossows held tightly to the memories of their trip. After a near-death experience, Peter told his wife that he needed to give some meaning to the suffering he was experiencing and came up with the idea of starting a nonprofit that would provide young cancer patients like himself a last hurrah.

He thought up the name Crossing the Finish Line and asked Marci to be sure to mention it in his newspaper death notice. "He told me what to write. I remember saying, 'I don't know if I should do this,' " said Marci, who at the time was a tax attorney for the IRS. "In July [1999] he sketched out this plan, 'We'll own four different houses and we'll own them in four different locations and we'll get a sponsor for each house.' "

It hasn't exactly worked out that way, at least not yet. Although Crossing the Finish Line owns property in Florida, the other houses it sends families to for free, weeklong vacations are donated for now. Marci, who has since remarried and had two children, runs Crossing the Finish Line in donated office space and has four full-time employees and four part-time nurses who help out. "We're a little small charity operating out of a tiny space, and we do great things," she said yesterday.

"We've turned away thousands of families since we started. My goal is that we don't have to."

If you'd like to help Crossing the Finish Line (crossingthefinishline.org), you can donate to the foundation or help Marci Bossow Schankweiler win a trip in the second annual People All Stars Among Us competition. For info, see <http://www.mlb.com/peopleallstarsamongus/>. Click on Phillies and then vote for Marci Schankweiler, Crossing the Finish Line. Voting ends June 20.

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