

Mt. Rainier next goal on road to recovery

Avalanche forecaster Peter Marshall raises money for rare disease

by Alison Taylor



The day before the grueling Vancouver to Whistler GranFondo cycling race most people are loading up on carbs, resting their legs, mentally preparing for the endurance battle ahead.

Not Peter Marshall.

The day before the 2011 GranFondo, Marshall was in the hospital, undergoing six hours of stomach-churning chemotherapy.

He says simply of the race: "It was torture. In hindsight, I probably totally shouldn't have done it."

But Marshall had set a goal 10 months before when he was lying in a hospital bed not sure when he would be able to walk again, newly diagnosed with an incurable autoimmune disease that had attacked his lungs; so he put his head down, kept his legs turning over and over again up the winding highway and made it to the end.

For once, for this former Ironman, his time was irrelevant; it was enough to simply cross the finish line.

Now, almost three years later, Marshall has a new goal: he intends to cycle the 500 kilometres from Vancouver to Mount Rainier in Washington State, where he will trade in his bike for climbing gear and aim for the peak before skiing down and biking home.

His journey begins on Wednesday, July 3.

While he's back in tip-top shape, the stark reality is that the disease has destroyed his lungs. He has about 60 per cent lung capacity. Marshall has Wegener's Granulomatosis, a rare autoimmune disease for which there is no cure.

His doctor, Jason Kur, says before modern medicine, there was an 80 per cent

fatality rate for this condition.

"It's in the spectrum of autoimmune conditions and with a lot of these we don't know the reason why," says Kur. "There's usually a genetic component at play. We also think there's some sort of environmental trigger... in his case, his immune system started attacking his lungs."

Marshall is out to raise funds for The Arthritis Society and research into the prevention and treatment of diseases like Wegener's Granulomatosis.

WG is rare, with an estimated 1 in 50,000 suffering from the disease.

Marshall is raising funds and awareness of Systemic Autoimmune Rheumatic Diseases; WG is included in that spectrum.

His goal: \$14,411, the summit in feet of Mount Rainier.

As an avalanche forecaster with the Canadian Avalanche Centre for areas around the Sea to Sky corridor, Marshall gets paid to predict the future and warn people accordingly.

Nothing, however, could have prepared him for the future that awaited him just weeks after his 2010 wedding.

In and out of the hospital following his Hawaiian honeymoon, it took a while before doctors could pin down the disease.

Marshall spent more than a week in intensive care, days on a breathing machine, the thought of even getting out of bed an insurmountable challenge.

His first time on his training bike lasted five minutes. He made goals to help him on the road to recovery, goals like the GranFondo. They have been instrumental in getting him back to health.

Kur, who has been treating Marshall, says when you have a chronic condition, setting goals and normalcy is very inspiring.

"As a physician, I never try to say 'no' to my patients when they have ideas for athletics and sports," he says.

Kur is joining Marshall for part of the cycling portion of the expedition, a show of solidarity and support for what his patient has accomplished.

Marshall is in remission and living with the condition, which means medicine every day, blood tests every two weeks and living with the uncertainty about the future.

"It could be another 20 years before I see another serious flare up or it could be tomorrow," says Marshall. "And you just have to live with that."

To stand at the top of Mount Rainier, somewhere he's never been before, will be profoundly satisfying, given that two-and-a-half years ago, he couldn't get out of bed.

"If I get to stand on top of the mountain, I think it will be a real sense of achievement for me," says Marshall.

He's halfway to his fundraising goal.

Follow Marshall's journey on his blog: <http://theaiexpedition.wordpress.com>.

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