

[This is the original article posted on the LIVESTRONG Foundation's website, published in numerous, national cycling and travel publications including regional newspapers and magazines in Texas and Colorado, and online at related sites.]



Judy Esposito, breast cancer survivor, pre-dawn at her first century ride with Jill Murphy Long.

Like You and Me

by Jill Murphy Long

As I packed my Bianchi bike for the *Ride for the Roses* century bike ride in Austin, Texas, I felt trepidation like I had before my other one-hundred mile bike rides, but this time for a different reason. I wasn't questioning my ability to cycle the designated mileage (100) at a respectable, yet self-imposed speed (20 mph), but was anxious about the arena I was to enter—the cancer community. While I have cycled hundreds of miles for other causes, usually those on the receiving end do not show up at the event. As with most firsts, my first time to Austin, my first time to ride a century without my cycling buddies, and my first time to ride with the individuals that I raised money for—I didn't know what to expect.

My first encounter with the community was Friday night when I met my roommate, Judy Esposito, a breast cancer survivor from Crested Butte, Colorado. Early in the year, she was diagnosed, underwent a double mastectomy, and now was here to prove something to herself. She was determined to ride her thirty-five pound, 'cross' bike into strong headwinds and up and down the rolling hills that surrounded Austin to complete the metric century (62 miles). Over dinner, I shared with her numerous tips that I had picked up during my decades of cycling. She was very nervous about completing the ride; I reassured her she could do it—she had beat cancer after all.

Since I was invited on behalf of the Lance Armstrong Foundation to autograph my book, *Permission to Play*, at the LIVESTRONG Village on Saturday, I had a chance to meet the survivors first hand. They came in wheelchairs to get an autograph from Linda Armstrong in her book, *No Mountain High Enough: Raising Lance, Raising Me*, or to ask George Hincapie to sign a *Tour de France* baseball cap. They came on crutches to catch a glimpse of Lance Armstrong and hear his inspirational words. They came on

tandem bikes because they were missing an arm or a leg, yet were resolved to cycle the daunting route and show the world the other side of life after cancer.

On Sunday, the day of the ride, I stood at daybreak with 6,500 cyclists listening to Lance Armstrong read the mission statement of his foundation. As I looked around me, I saw so many cycling jerseys pinned with yellow cards and handwritten messages of hope:

Colon Cancer Survivor—2 Years
Breast Cancer Survivor—4 Years
Prostate Cancer Survivor—1 Year
Cancer Free—30 Days!

My jersey too was covered in yellow cards, acknowledging family and friends, the deceased and survivors:

In Memory of Sherry, my mother-in-law
In Honor of Uncle Richard
In Honor of Janet Kelly
In Honor of Robbie Hudson



Two of my yellow cards
blew off somewhere in Texas...

For one hundred miles, I rode in awe of what the human spirit can accomplish. Cancer survivors pedaled the rolling course, some of it easy, some of it hard, and all of it uncannily similar to their battle with cancer. Some would dismount and walk their bikes up the hills that stretched on too long, but they were out there living stronger...perhaps than ever before. Mile after mile, I was moved by their pure determination, some pedaled slowly; others would pick up the speed and ride beside me for a mile or ten. My ride was made easier because of their sheer determination.

On one long road, I saw something that will always stay with me. Parked at an intersection, an older woman sat in her truck with a huge sign anchored to the roof. She beeped her horn and pointed at her handmade sign: “Thank You! From A Cancer Survivor!”

Still, the finish line was an elusive dot on the faraway horizon. Would they make it? The last miles of any ride can be expected to be tough, usually uphill and into the wind. This *Ride for the Roses* did not disappoint. The last turn back into the Travis County Expo Center took us up a steep grade and directly into a gale force, headwind.

By the end of my ride, I realized that these survivors, and those still fighting this horrible disease, are just like you and me. They could be you or me. Cancer isn't selective. It can strike anyone, any body. They are like you and me with similar dreams for the future: to be healthy, to watch another sunrise, to live a full and happy life.

I'll be riding in the next LIVESTRONG Ride in Denver, Colorado. Join me—if not for you—for them.

Thanks to the generosity of my publisher, Sourcebooks, all proceeds from the sale of my books were donated to the LIVESTRONG Foundation.

Jill Murphy Long is the best-selling and award-winning author of the PERMISSION BOOK SERIES including *Permission to Play*, *Taking Time to Renew Your Smile*, who lives and cycles in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. To read excerpts or book this inspirational author, please visit: www.permissionbooks.com or call her Business Manager, Cynthia Brian: (925) 376-7827.