

# “Epic Experience” Revives Spirits in Adult Cancer Survivors

By Joelle Klein

When Nancy Ferro came to the University of Colorado Cancer Center to speak at a staff meeting in December of 2012, she was looking for a few volunteers for her recently formed organization. She met that goal and along the way helped to change the lives of both cancer survivors and providers.



*UCH Cancer Center employees (from left) Kelly Adams, Cindi Taylor-Moll and Jamie Bachman volunteered to help cancer survivors find adventure with Epic Experience.*

In 2012, Ferro and Abby Staible, a physician assistant at Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, co-founded Epic Experience, an organization that offers adult cancer survivors outdoor adventures aimed at helping them feel rejuvenated and giving them “a little bit of hope,” as Ferro puts it.

Epic Experience is an expense-paid program open to anyone who was ever diagnosed with cancer, whether it was last month or 30 years ago.

“Once someone’s been diagnosed with cancer, it’s part of your life forever,” Ferro said.

Recognizing the strong need for survivors to be able to be around people who’ve gone through similar experiences, Ferro planned

the camp with the idea of giving them support through life-affirming adventure activities.

“We’ve seen the difference one week can make in people’s lives ... just being with other survivors and being able to say what they want to people who totally get it and understand what they’re going through – and watching the joy in their faces, saying ‘I can do this, I can get back out and live again,’” she said.

**Cancer connection.** Ferro’s connection to University of Colorado Hospital is personal: Ferro’s son, Michael, is a cancer survivor who was treated by UCH urologist Paul Maroni, MD, in 2007, as well as by neurosurgeon Kevin Lillehei, MD, and endocrinologist Janice Kerr, MD.

So it was perhaps not surprising that Ferro hit the jackpot in her volunteer quest last December. Four Cancer Center employees, including nurses Leigh Kaszyk, RN, MS, OCN, and Cindi Taylor-Moll, RN; Executive Director of Oncology Services Jamie Bachman; and Cancer Center Patient Program Coordinator Kelly Adams, all signed up to assist as medical volunteers, kitchen help, amateur kayak guides, dishwashers and anything else they were needed for.

The four came along for Epic Experience’s second trip, this one to a 200-acre ranch in Sweetwater, Colo., about 40 miles outside of Vail, from June 23 to 29. The main activity was whitewater kayaking, but participants also had opportunities for horseback riding, stand-up paddleboarding, hiking, and fly-fishing as well as acupuncture and massage.

Emotional support was also part of the game plan. Every morning started with “laughing yoga” and every evening closed with participants sitting near a campfire to share stories about their cancer diagnosis and treatment, struggles and issues, and how the diagnosis changed their lives.

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**Life-affirming.** Most of the camp clients were current or former UCH Cancer Center patients, which offered providers a unique opportunity, Kaszyk said. "I didn't really go with any expectations but I thought it would be a good way to see our patients outside of being treated," she said,

She and Taylor-Moll split medical duties on the June trip while Bachman and Adams did everything from acting as amateur river guides to handling kitchen cleanup.

"I didn't know what to expect. I love what I do but it was probably one of the coolest work-related experiences I've ever had," said Bachman.



*Epic Experience volunteers and campers ham it up for the camera.*

**The long road back.** The volunteers got a chance to see what cancer takes from people and how a program like Epic Experience can help them reclaim their strength and dignity.

Engineer Chad Hammond, now 30, was diagnosed with mucinous adenocarcinoma – cancer of the appendix – last year during a simple hernia repair operation. Surgeons performed an appendectomy, thinking that the mucous-like cancer substance found in his appendix was localized. It was not.

Hammond was referred to UCH surgeon Nathan Pearlman, MD, for further treatment. He underwent the Sugarbaker procedure, which involves a lengthy infusion of warmed anti-cancer drugs in the abdomen, followed by six rounds of systemic chemotherapy.

"I felt like it was never ending," Hammond said of the treatments.

As active rock climber and occasional trail runner, Hammond has had a long road back to full recovery. "I felt like a shell of my former self for a while," he said.

He heard about Epic Experience through a cancer newsletter and signed up. "There is no support group for my type of cancer and I tried a national group but my cancer mostly affects older women so finding someone active like I was beforehand was next to impossible," Hammond recalled.

At the camp, he was grateful to meet others who had experiences similar to his own. "Hearing all the stuff they've overcome and all this stuff they've done, it made me realize that my situation is something I can work at and overcome. It seems easier to handle if you realize other people are going through it with you," Hammond said.

He also greatly enjoyed all the activities, which he said forced him to live in the moment. For the first time in a long time, he was able to put all his worries and issues out of his mind, even if for only a short time.

Ferro plans to run six trips for survivors and two for caregivers this year. Each trip has at least one medical volunteer and six or more volunteers to help out with activities, cooking and general organizing and cleanup. UCH oncologist Michael Glodé, MD, is scheduled to attend the August 4 trip, while Maroni is on board for the August 25 adventure.

*If you're interested in volunteering or donating to Epic Experience, visit their [website](#) to learn more.*