

# Riding in tandem for a cure

## Team 'Live Positive' takes to the roads in Closer to Free Ride Sept. 9

By Lisa Reisman

lisareisman27@gmail.com

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**WESTBROOK** » For 18 years, Cheryl Casey and Jake Shea lived in a one-room cabin in Westbrook, a stone's throw from Bill's Seafood, where Casey waitressed and Shea worked as a bartender. They were a tandem, everyone said.

On Saturday, Sept. 9, Casey will be riding a tandem with Bill's Seafood manager Mark Leopoldino in Smilow Cancer Hospital's (Smilow) Closer to Free Ride in memory of Shea, who died on Jan. 7 after a 10-year battle with cancer.

As members of Team Live Positive, she and Leopoldino are also riding in honor of Jen Welch, a Bill's Seafood bartender whose life was taken by cancer at age 38 in August 2013.

The "exuberant" Welch was a woman who could walk seven dogs at a time, according to Maureen Raucci, Smilow patient services manager, oncology nurse and Team Live Positive captain. It was Welch, along with Live Positive member and survivor Amy Stinton, who helped give the team its name.

"It's a way to recognize patients like Jen who had such a positive outlook," she said on a recent afternoon at her office on the inpatient medical oncology unit on Smilow's 12th floor. "That's how she kept battling for six years. That's how she endured so many rounds of chemo."

Since the Ride's inception in 2011, Team Live Positive, under Raucci's captaincy, has grown from 12 members to, at last count, 114. It has raised \$674,000 in the past six years, and that's not counting the 2017 Ride. This year, the goal is

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The team: front from left — Mark Leopoldino, manager of Bill's Seafood of Guilford; Maureen Raucci, oncology nurse at Smilow Cancer Center at Yale New Haven, and captain of "Live Positive"; Elle Wasyl, of Old Saybrook; Cheryl Casey, of Westbrook. Back from left — survivor Dolly Mezzetti, of Clinton; Gary Dangle, of West Haven; and Trudy Super, of Guilford. They will participate in the Closer to Free Ride, Sept. 9.



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\$150,000. Raucci expects to exceed that.

But this isn't a story about Raucci's fundraising prowess or the work she does at the bedsides of cancer patients in addition to the ride. It's not about Cheryl Casey or Mark Leopoldino.

It's about what they're all riding for.

It's about the fact that 100 percent of the funds raised by Closer to Free riders and volunteers goes to research and patient care at Smilow, with sponsors covering overhead and administrative costs, an "unheard-of feat for a nonprofit," said Raucci.

It's about the chills Raucci gets when she and her team, as well as thousands of their fellow riders, come to their first stop at the entrance of Smilow.

"There are patients outside in wheelchairs and oxygen masks, and they're holding signs, and those who can't come downstairs can watch via live screen on their TV," she said.

"To be able to ride in front of the hospital and see your patients out there, cheering you on, knowing you're out there pedaling for them, knowing each mile brings us closer to a cure, that's why we ride."

It's about her inpatient staff not only contending with work that is, as Raucci put it, "the hardest you'll ever do but also the most rewarding," but still, on the day of the ride, either taking to their bikes, volunteering, or working on the unit.

"They don't have to, but they do," said Raucci. "They're that invested in showing their patients and families that they're part of the fight."

It's about the way the

ride "brings out the best in everyone," Raucci said. One year, she found herself detached from the group. Someone in a passing car rolled down the window. "She told me she was a survivor and thanked me for making a difference," Raucci recalled.

Then there are the people out on their lawns along the route. "It's not an official rest stop, but they still have their signs and they're cheering and there are little kids ringing bells and jumping up and down," she said.

It's about the generosity of spirit that abounds off the course as well. Zane's Cycles in Branford has donated bikes to Team Live Positive each year to raffle off. Wallingford Buick GMC did the same with a car. Guilford Mooring has opened its space for fundraising events. So has Bill's Seafood.

"It's a no-brainer," said Leopoldino on a recent afternoon at Bill's, clad in a Team Jake T-shirt with a rendering of Casey and Shea on a tandem bike. "We watched Jen and Jake fight the good fight. We got close to the Smilow nurses. Some of them are regulars at Bill's. We saw how much they cared."

He and his staff also watched in awe as Jen Welch's wife Meredith Anderson did the 100-mile ride and raised \$25,000 just a month after Welch passed. And that kind of transcendent effort, it seems, is what keeps everyone going mile after mile.

Just ask Branford's Patti Ferraro, who will be riding with Team Live Positive for the seventh year.

In one of the early years of the Ride, she witnessed a woman with no hair on a rickety bike cross the finish line at Yale Bowl. "She had done 100 miles on that bike," she said. "And later we heard her saying she'd had chemo the day before."



Maureen Raucci, oncology nurse at Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale New Haven and team captain of "Live Positive," gears up for the Closer to Free Ride, a fundraiser for the cancer center, at Bill's Seafood in Westbrook, a supporter of the ride. (Catherine Avalone/Hearst Connecticut Media)

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— Mark Leopoldino

After that, she said, "I remind myself when I've been sitting on my bike for seven hours and my shoulders are aching and my back is locked up and my legs are cramping that it's nothing compared to what cancer patients have to get through."

Raucci had a similar take. "There's nothing more inspiring than riding alongside current patients or their family members or family

members of patients who have passed," she said.

"They're the very embodiment of Team Live Positive."

Maybe they'll ride 100 miles, as Ferraro plans to do. Maybe, like Casey and Leopoldino on their tandem, they'll cycle only 10. The distance doesn't matter. They're out there, riding, so in 20 years or 50, or 75, they won't have to ride in memory of loved ones like Jake Shea and Jen Welch.

They won't be closer to free. They'll be free.

For more information on the Closer to Free Ride, including routes, visit <https://www.ridecloserto-free.org/>. To make a donation, visit <https://www.ridecloserto-free.org/donate> or send check to YNH Office of Development, PO Box 1849, New Haven, CT 06508. Team Jake T-shirts are available at Bill's Seafood, 548 Boston Post Road, Westbrook.



Cheryl Casey, of Westbrook, a member of the team, "Live Positive" at Bill's Seafood at 548 Boston Post Road in Westbrook. (Catherine Avalone/Hearst Connecticut Media)