

# Amazon Heart



photo: Jill Karnicki

WHAT IF BREAST CANCER WAS JUST THE START OF AN INCREDIBLE ADVENTURE? THAT'S THE QUESTION TWO YOUNG BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS FROM OTHER SIDES OF THE WORLD ASKED THEMSELVES AFTER A CHANCE MEETING IN SYDNEY IN 2002.

WORDS: MEGAN DWYER

**MEGAN DWYER, FROM CALIFORNIA,** was just six weeks out of chemo when she met young Australian survivor, Meredith Campbell, at a sailing regatta in Sydney that year. The two discovered that not only did they share the experience of being diagnosed with breast cancer at a young age - in their 30s - but a yearning to challenge and stretch themselves now that they were on the other side of treatment. After several months of emailing and phone calls, Amazon Heart was born - a unique organisation that runs peer support adventures for women diagnosed with breast cancer.

Amazon Heart has a simple goal - to meet the needs of women living with breast cancer through a unique approach to peer support - life changing adventures that help women come to terms with their experiences and move on to live life fully. In 2004, Amazon Heart held its first *Amazon Heart Thunder* adventure, a one week motorcycle ride from San Diego to San Francisco, California. The adventure was so successful they have now expanded and are offering a range of adventure experiences around the world:

- Amazon Heart Thunder motorcycle adventures in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.
  - Amazon Heart Expedition - one week treks in New Zealand and Arizona.
  - Amazon Heart Odyssey - one week community action projects, such as building houses in disadvantaged communities in Sri Lanka, India and Montana.
- Since that first adventure in October 2004, 144 women from Australia, Malaysia, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom have taken part in 15 adventures in the United Kingdom, US, Australia, Sri Lanka, New Zealand and India.

In 2005 a University of Queensland research project evaluated the impact of participating in Amazon Heart adventures on women's psychosocial adjustment to breast cancer and found it provided a unique and long lasting positive impact. "The experience of breast cancer impacts everyone who is forced to deal with it in profound and sometimes unexpected ways," says Megan Dwyer, Co-Founder of Amazon Heart. "For those of us who have been through the experience of a diagnosis, there seems to be a common theme of wanting to live life fully; right now, in this moment. And there is also a strong need to connect with others who share this common bond. Amazon Heart is exactly that - women living with breast cancer coming together to form a supportive community, taking on a new challenge and living life to the fullest."

Meredith Campbell, Amazon Heart's other Co-founder, adds, "Breast cancer survivors speak a common language born of experience, but we have too few opportunities to share our wisdom with each other and to make our voices heard in the wider community. Amazon Heart's adventures bring survivors together to raise awareness of our unique needs and to continue along our own personal path of growth and healing by building a supportive community." Amazon Heart adventures are open to all women diagnosed with breast cancer regardless of age and the stage of their breast cancer journey. "Our oldest participant was a 73-year-old woman from the United Kingdom who rode in our Amazon Heart Thunder motorcycle ride in the United Kingdom last year. Our youngest was diagnosed at the age of 21, and took part in both our Montana and Arizona

adventures. On every trip we usually have one or more women living with metastatic breast cancer - our adventures are about living life to the fullest regardless of where you are in your breast cancer journey," says Meredith.

Amazon Heart has truly become a global phenomenon, and had invitations to present the programme at the World Cancer Congress in Washington in July 2006, the Reach to Recovery International Breast Cancer Support Conference in Stockholm in May 2007, and numerous conferences across Australia and Asia. Amazon Heart will also feature in the programme of the 15th UICC Reach to Recovery International Breast Cancer Support Conference in Brisbane in May 2009, and is the inspiration behind a planned half day experiential adventure benefit-finding workshop in the conference programme. All participants in Amazon Heart adventures pay their own travel costs, and also commit to fundraise for breast cancer charities in their country of origin. Since October 2004, the group has raised over USD\$587,000 for breast cancer causes. Their next New Zealand adventure will be a trek in the Southern Highlands in April 2009. So far no New Zealand breast cancer survivors have joined an Amazon Heart adventure but Meredith and Megan are keen to encourage them to apply. "We'd love to see some Kiwis on our adventures and we'd be happy to talk to any local survivors and breast cancer organisations about how we could work together".

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