

**BRECKENRIDGE MAGAZINE/GIVE BACK/SUMMER 2013:
LOCAL HERO KEN ADNAN, MD.**



Summit County physician Ken Adnan had already paddled down many rivers prior to his first volunteer stint with the non-profit First Descents. His first trip with the group may, however, have taught him more about the value of taking risks in the wild than any rapid he's ever run.

First Descents offers free outdoor experiences to cancer fighters and survivors to help them reclaim their lives after a diagnosis – and help them connect with others traveling a similar road. At the core of the program are weeklong kayaking, rock climbing, and surfing programs for young adults aged 18-39. The belief underlying the programs is that challenging outdoor experiences offer unique opportunities to empower these individuals to “climb, paddle, and surf beyond their diagnosis.”

The importance of outdoor adventure after a serious diagnosis is something that Adnan understands intimately. In 2002, the 49-year old physician was diagnosed with

Fibromyxoid Sarcoma, a rare soft tissue cancer. The mass lay deep in his calf, and Adnan would likely never have discovered it had he not been training for the New York Marathon along with his wife, Holly. During their last long training run, he began experiencing significant pain in his lower leg.

“Typical physician, I totally brushed off my symptoms,” laughs Adnan. But Holly was adamant that he pursue a diagnosis. A bone scan revealed a large mass in his lower leg.

“Going through the diagnosis, and all the not knowing over the years: If you can survive it, cancer gives you a chance to embrace life as fully as you can,” reflects Adnan. “I ended up having three surgeries, and I’ve had to go back regularly for follow up scans. The last surgery required a major skin graft. People ask about the scar: I just say it was a shark bite. Now, I’m ten years out, so they’re saying the prognosis is pretty good.”

The couple first volunteered with First Descents in 2004, the year after Ken completed his surgeries. Both serve on First Descent’s Medical Advisory Board and volunteer on outdoor programs 1-2 weeks each year. The volunteer stints offer them a chance to experience first-hand participant’s transformations. “One of the things that First Descents gives back to people is their self-confidence – and reconnection with their inner strength. It reminds them how to live fully again,” says Holly.

“On First Descents trips, we have a campfire at the end of the day, and everyone shares their experience — about rolling their kayak, about a challenging wave. Camaraderie comes out of that. And something magical happens in the process,” expands Adnan. “The participants get engaged in something really positive in their lives, and leave a part of their cancer behind. It’s their chance to embrace and engage in life to its fullest.”

“The thing that is so meaningful for me is that everybody’s story is so amazing,” says Adnan. “Watching their courage just puts everything in perspective. Every camp is made up of thousands of poignant moments. Every time Holly and I volunteer we get so much out of hearing their stories, watching people evolve, and seeing the courage they show. It carries us through to the next year.”

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