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Barb MacKay, Joey Cheek and the ripple effect

By Ogi Overman (reprinted with permission from *YES! WEEKLY*)



It's called the ripple effect. And Barbara MacKay-Vinson is the pebble in the pond that creates the ever-widening concentric ripples. She is the beacon, emitting rays of hope, illuminating the darkest hour just before dawn. And whether she is willing to admit it or not, after 13 years of nonstop whirlwind philanthropic activity, she has emerged as one of the Triad's influential movers and shakers.

She didn't intend for it to be that way. But more often than not, life its own self seems to dictate our path more than our best-laid plans. Barb would have been perfectly content being a medical assistant, wife and mother, but life - or, in her case, death - had other plans. Her husband Bob was stricken with leukemia in 1990, finally succumbing to the disease on Dec. 23, 1993. During his valiant struggle Barb became friends with most of the hematology and oncology staff at the Bowman Gray School of Medicine (now the Wake Forest School of Medicine) in Winston-Salem. Because Bob was such an accomplished and devoted golfer, she'd been batting around an idea of holding a golf tournament in his memory to raise funds for the hospital that had cared for him. On the day he died, she pitched the idea to Dr. David Hurd, director of the facility's bone marrow transplant department, and he offered his full support. Thus was born the Bob MacKay Memorial Golf Tournament, which held its inaugural event at Forest Oaks on May 23, 1994.

"It was five months to the day from when Bob died," says Barb wistfully. "I wanted to do at least one and maybe two or three, but I never dreamed that it would snowball like it did."

Snowball indeed. Thirteen years and as many tournaments later, the event has raised well over a half million dollars for cancer research.

But the story doesn't end there; far from it. Once it appeared that the golf tournament would begin to perpetuate itself, she applied for 501(c)(3) status, which gave her the designation of a charitable foundation, hereinafter known as the MacKay Foundation for Cancer Research.

By 2003 Barb had expanded her efforts to benefit research into other forms of cancer by organizing additional fundraisers. She held the first Sports Night in 2004 and it has now become an annual event. Plus, she has augmented that with other special events such as Starlight Star Bright, in which donors honor someone touched by cancer by purchasing a star that hangs for a month in the outpatient cancer center at WFU; a concert at the Carolina Theatre by the Carolina Brass Ensemble; a beer tasting at Natty Greene's; and a dance and dinner featuring the NC Jazz Orchestra.

MacKay Foundation for Cancer Research

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"What I think I'm moving toward is those 'non-event events' like Starlight Star Bright," she discloses, "where you don't have to worry about covering the cost of the event itself. I'm always open to any ideas and don't shut the door on anything. But the great thing about having an event like the golf tournament or Sports Night is that you become known so that you can do those other things."

For the record, after proceeds from the third annual Sports Night are tallied, the MacKay Foundation will have topped the \$700,000 mark in contributions.

"The really good thing is that others have formed foundations because they heard what I did," smiles Barb. "I get referred to a lot of other folks that I'm able to give the benefit of my experience. And sometimes what I am able to give serves as seed money. For instance, I gave one doctor \$20,000 for a research project. He finished it, got it published and, through that initial gift, has received around \$150,000 from people around the world wanting to back his research."

That's the ripple effect.

An Evening with Joey Cheek

If Barb's altruism produces a ripple effect, there's also a snowball effect at work. After her first two Sports Nights - the first featuring a Carolina Panthers roast of Wake Forest product Ricky Proehl, and the second an informative and entertaining discussion among ACC basketball coaches Skip Prosser, Herb Sendek and Bobby Cremins - people and organizations began stepping up to the plate with contributions even before having been asked. One such contributor was Mark Brazil, director of the Chrysler Classic of Greensboro (next year the Wyndham Championship).

"Mark called and said they'd chosen five or six charities they were going to support with outright gifts," she enthused, "and we were one of them. They'll be gifting \$10,000 or more each year for the next ten years, so we've made them our Premier Partner. We have a total of fourteen corporate sponsors now for Sports Night. In fact, this year I had the sponsorship lined up before I even had a celebrity."

All that changed during the 2006 Winter Olympics. As anyone vaguely aware of his surroundings knows, Greensboro's favorite son, Joey Cheek, won both gold and silver medals in speedskating, to add to his bronze from the 2002 Olympics. As if those feats were not astounding enough, he then announced that he was giving his \$25,000 bonus from the US Olympic Committee to Right To Play, an organization of athletes who use sport as a tool for development of underprivileged countries, particularly the horribly ravaged region of Darfur in Sudan.

With that one act of human compassion, Cheek went from Olympic hero to international statesman, raising not only awareness but untold millions for that starving nation.

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Barb was introduced to Joey by Walker Sanders, president of the Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro, and, after checking his hectic calendar, agreed to headline her Oct. 16 event. He will be joined on the dais by fellow Olympian Dan Jansen, 1994 speedskating gold medalist, both of whom will make themselves available to the crowd at the gala. The banquet at the Grandover Resort will be emceed by FOX 8 news anchor Cindy Farmer.

"Joey told me that he did something a thousand people do," says Barb, "he just did it in front of a camera. He said he didn't realize what effect that gesture would have on people."

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