

The Beginning of Jen's Friends Cancer Foundation

By Maria Mahessel Veale

Wednesday nights were "free pasta" nights at the Corner Café in Boston's North End. Scott [Arsonson] and I were still just a few years out of college, so we met there with other UNH friends on a regular basis for a free meal and cheap beer.

On this particular Wednesday night in June of 1998 Scott greeted me with a long face and the terrible news that our friend Doug Hill's younger sister Jen had been diagnosed with brain cancer. On top of that, because she was a part time graduate student and part time employee of the National Forest Service, she had no health insurance. We sat there stunned and heartbroken, no longer feeling like twenty something was as invincible as it had been just the day before.

Although we felt helpless, we wanted to do whatever we could. The only thing we could think of was to try to raise money to at least relieve some of the financial burden. There were still so many friends from UNH that we kept in touch with, and we calculated that purely by tapping into Scott and Doug's fraternity we'd be able to raise a substantial sum. I also knew that even though Dave [David Veale] hadn't yet met some of these people that he would jump in with both feet to help, because it just felt like the right thing, and the only thing, that we could do.

Scott organized the first meeting at a hotel in Portsmouth, because one of our friends was the manager there at the time and we didn't have to pay to use a conference room. Somehow, even in the earliest days of Jen's Friends, before anyone knew what we were about, we managed to have so many things donated once people heard Jen's story. There were 15 of us there that night, including Jen's brother Doug, who gave an update on Jen to start the meeting.

Everyone had something different to bring to the table: John "JR" Roy's father was an attorney, and would go on to help with all of our start up documents free of charge; JR himself was the cofounder of Verndale Corp, who wound up designing and continues to maintain Jen's Friends website; Johnny "Big Dog" Miyares has always been an excellent resource for grants and many other critical pieces of research, and is also the one who came up with the name "Jen's Friends"; Chris Webb had connections to have food and drinks donated; Dave and I worked at Putnam Investments, where we knew we'd be able to obtain donated envelopes and postage for mailings; Scott had countless resources in the medical and fundraising fields, without whom we never would have gotten off the ground; and the list truly goes on and on. We scheduled the first hike for Saturday, October 17, 1998, and backed into our deadlines from there.

Every meeting started with a prayer for Jen and an update from Doug if he was there. Our second meeting was at the fraternity house at UNH during the first week of July. We were heartbroken to hear at this meeting that Jen's prognosis was not good, and were determined to forge ahead. By this meeting, Dave had already secured Mt Cranmore as the location for our first hike and many of the critical tasks were underway. Scott suggested we do a 12,000 piece mailing to inform the community of our goals, and to secure a base of volunteers and hikers. We didn't know much about mailing automation, to say the least. For the next 5 weeks we spent almost every night folding, stuffing, labeling, return addressing, sealing, and sorting these letters. We had a table set up in my living room, and everyone took turns bringing the pizza. Our friend Mike McCue's father owned a small business, and he brought over an envelope sealer one night so we could stop sealing them by hand, but it didn't work very well so he used (and ruined) my roommate's favorite rolling pin for leverage. The mailing process was an experience

that brought us all closer and allowed us the opportunity to spend enough time together to discuss our hopes and plans for the event.

By August we were spending every weekend in North Conway, walking door to door to solicit donations, volunteers, hikers, or at the very least, hang a poster and leave brochures. Liz GeorgeHussey at the First Church of Christ was one of those introductions I'll never forget – she jumped up from her desk, hugged us all when we walked in, and talked about what a wonderful thing it was that we were doing. It was probably the moment we felt like the whole community was behind us in this effort, and such a positive turning point for our momentum.

Every time we received a check in the mail or a phone call that someone wanted to hike or volunteer, we were so excited. However, our excitement was tempered by the news we were hearing from the Hill family on Jennifer's condition. News came from Doug that Jen was very humbled by our efforts, but that she knew of so many others in her situation and hoped we would help them too. Initially, we hadn't thought of expanding our help outside of doing what we could for Jen, but based on her suggestion things started to fall into place.

As the event neared, Scott had begun discussions with Liz George-Hussey, RuthAnn Fabrizio, the Hill family, and many others about forming what has evolved into the Board of Directors.

I can't speak for the others, but I was unable to eat or sleep for the last few days leading up to that first event. I had never been so emotionally attached to the outcome of anything before. We knew people were coming, including the lady who called to say she'd be bringing her llamas, naturally, in her school bus, but we didn't know how many hikers would actually show up, how we would be received by the community, how the logistics of the day would go, and what our fundraising totals would be. Less than 12 hours before, we still had a dozen people at Dave's parents' house writing out the forms for the silent auction, finishing up instructions for the volunteers, and trying to calm each others' nerves. To say I was a wreck would be such an understatement.

Fortunately, the day was wonderful, and we were blessed with so much. Jennifer was able to listen to the play by play thanks to George Cleveland, Charlie Osgood, and the rest of the folks at WMWV [Mt. Washington Radio Station]. She knew that we raised over \$68,000, and that hundreds of people came to help start "Jen's Friends."

Maria Veale: One especially meaningful time for Jen's Friends was when Dave and I met Einar Gustafson at another charity event. He was so moved by the story of Jen's Friends and the work of our volunteer group that he made a special appearance at two of our Climbs. His name may not ring a bell for some of you, but who he was meant something to everyone. Einar was also known as Jimmy, the first chemotherapy patient and the initial poster child and spokesperson for the Jimmy Fund. His words of support were moving, and we were honored to have Jen's memory recognized by such an individual.