

## Highlights

- Theater reviews
- The Eat Beat
- Hear & Now
- Local archaeology

# CITYLIFE

## How to Reach Citylife

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# Survivor rides to freedom after cancer

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**T**alk about survival and talk about changing gears — both are subjects near and dear to Karen Richards, who is putting the pedal to the metal as she joins 19 other courageous breast-cancer survivors from across the United States and Australia riding motorcycles this week in a California event to raise awareness and funds for breast cancer support programs.

"There is life after cancer," Richards says in a tone of conviction, almost defiance.

The 43-year-old's inspiring story is proof.

The reality is Richards, a Lincoln Park resident, experienced changing gears long before being chosen for the Changing Gears motorcycle ride that began Saturday, Oct. 2, in San Diego and will end Saturday, Oct. 9, in San Francisco.

Two other Chicagoans, Christina Koenig and Teresa Rosainz, also were selected from 60 applicants — all under age 45 — to ride donated Harley-Davidsons in the event sponsored by Amazon Heart, an organization supporting the unique needs of young women living with breast cancer. Money raised by riders will benefit Y-ME National Breast Cancer Organization and Young Survival Coalition.

Of the more than 2 million U.S. women living with breast cancer, 250,000



Karen Richards and her Suzuki. (Photo by Sandy Thorn Clark)

are under the age of 45. Richards says these women experience a higher degree of social isolation, greater financial stress, more unhappiness, and have greater unmet needs than older cancer patients. She hopes raising awareness and her personal fund-raising goal of \$5,000 will make a difference.

Since discovering the life-threatening lump, the native Chicagoan has survived cancer, ended her seven-year marriage, completed one college degree and is pursuing another, changed jobs, and has a new passion: motorcycle riding.

In February 2002, Richards discovered the lump in her right breast. "It wasn't

hard to feel — I could see it," she recalls, instantly placing her palm directly above the low-cut Harley-Davidson leather vest she's wearing.

Her immediate reaction? "Honestly, my first thought was of shopping for wigs. Then I thought: Just imagine the possibilities of this journey."

It turns out her imagination was hardly vivid enough to predict much of the journey.

On Valentine's Day, nine days after discovering the lump, Richards — in what she describes as "the most terrifying day of my life" — was diagnosed with three tumors and two kinds of cancer. She opted for a bilateral mastectomy reconstruction (surgery that removed and reconstructed both breasts), followed by chemotherapy and five years on Tamoxifen, a drug intended to slow or stop the growth of cancer cells. Twenty-three lymph nodes were removed, and none showed any signs of cancer.

"That's when I realized God had tapped me on the shoulder several times in the past, but this was the big stick, the big *whap!* My cancer was a wake-up call," explains Richards.

"It was clear to me that I wasn't doing what I was supposed to do," Richards shares matter-of-factly, "and I felt that if I didn't figure it out, the cancer would eventually win.

See **CANCER**, Page 6

# Cancer

Continued from Page 1

"I feel there's a physical component to cancer, an environmen-

tal component to cancer, and an emotional component to cancer. Maybe there's even a spiritual component."

Richards explored therapy, homeopathy, holistic medicine,

acupuncture and Chinese medicine, increasingly understanding the connection between mind and body. "I learned just how toxic anger and resentment can be," she says, her doe-like brown eyes welling with tears.

Determined not to let cancer consume and extinguish her life, Richards continued pursuing her bachelor's degree — a goal abandoned for 20 years — which she completed, with the help of a tutor, while recovering from surgery. As she began chemotherapy and started wearing wigs and scarves to cover her hairless head, she enrolled in a graduate program in computer science.

Her worst struggle, she admits, was the abandonment she felt when chemotherapy ended and family and friends returned to their own lives.

Last summer, she left her marriage of seven years. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but one of the most important and pivotal," Richards says, acknowledging that the divorce followed four years of marriage counseling. "I thought: I don't think I can stay in this marriage. Then I thought: Now what? He's a great guy, and

we ended amicably, but he couldn't be what I needed," she says, simultaneously fidgeting with a long silver-hoop earring and wisps of her stylish cropped hair.

Richards, who still struggles with lymphedema in both arms — a common chronic swelling resulting from a damaged lymphatic system — began a new job as office and project manager at Capital H Group, a human-capital consulting company in the Loop.

And she met Nathan Resnick, the man who took her on her first five-day, 500-mile motorcycle ride and whom she now introduces as her boyfriend and coach. Her love for motorcycle riding was instantaneous, "because riding exactly mirrored the new feelings of freedom I was experiencing."

Believing "four wheels free the body, two wheels free the soul," Richards quickly moved from motorcycle passenger to rider. In July, she received notification of her acceptance as a Changing Gears rider; by mid-August, she was taking free lessons at Illinois Harley-Davidson in Berwyn. And two weeks to the day after she received her motorcycle learner's permit, she bought a snazzy candy apple red 800 Suzuki. In California, she'll ride a Harley Sportster 1200.

Resnick confesses he's not surprised: "When Karen gets something in her mind, she does it."

In addition to quickly acquiring riding jeans, chaps, boots, helmets, gloves, tank tops, sun glasses and goggles, Richards visited a tattoo artist to have the Changing Gears logo of a blue-haired motorcycle rider adorn her lower back. Beneath the logo, she chose Chinese characters meaning "to overcome."

"A Chinese woman told me the characters, in effect, say: Cancer, I am through with you! Cancer, you are gone and it's over! That's *exactly* my sentiment," the spunky survivor adds, her dimples deepening as her convincing smile broadens.

*To follow Karen Richards and the other Changing Gears riders or to make an online donation, see <http://www.changinggears.org>.*