

## Young breast cancer survivor celebrates with a 212-mile bike challenge

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ProvidedHeather Baird makes her way through Amish country in Pennsylvania during the 212-mile Tour de Pink

Thirty-year-old Heather Baird never really took on physical challenges, other than an occasional 5K, before she was diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2011.

But a couple of weeks ago, she completed a three-day, 212-mile Tour de Pink bike tour from Philadelphia, through hilly Amish country, to Washington, D.C.

And on Sunday, she plans to run her first half-marathon, the Myrtle Beach Mini Marathon. Beyond that, she wants to do a triathlon.

Baird, a buyer at a local aerospace company, says the bike ride was “the biggest (physical) thing I’ve done, by far” and marked the closing of a chapter in her life that included four surgeries and a year and a half of recovery.

“This was a huge thing for me,” says Baird, who was accompanied on the ride by a relatively new boyfriend, Shawn O’Kane. “The hills were particularly challenging for me. I didn’t have any to train on here, other than the (Cooper River) bridge.”

But she did it and she’s moving forward.

“Every day gets better,” says Baird, who lives in West Ashley. “Honestly, it (breast cancer) is always kind of with you because of the fear of recurrence, but I’m getting back into shape and I’ve got my life back.”

## Young survivors

Baird is the leader of the local Young Survival Coalition Face 2 Face Network, a group I became acquainted with two years ago. The national group and its local networks seek to provide support to women age 40 and under diagnosed with breast cancer.

Last year, I shared the pain of the group in writing about the passing of one of its co-founders, Kristie Higdon, at age 38. It was, frankly, one of the hardest stories I’ve had to write because of the young woman’s determination and ambitions.

Her legacy lives on with the local YSC and the work of Baird and three other locally based state leaders, Libby Seabrook Brown, Shari Kaple and Rosie Wells.

The local group meets regularly at 6:30 p.m. on the fourth Tuesday of every month at Liberty Tap Room in Mount Pleasant.

The local group hasn’t grown much, holding steady at about a dozen active members, as some come and go.

But the group is there to provide advice and understanding for young women whose lives have been interrupted by breast cancer just as relationships, careers and child-bearing are often just beginning.

## Tour de Pink

Baird picked the 10th annual Tour de Pink, one of three national outdoor

### The Stats

More than 11,000 women under 40 will be diagnosed with breast cancer in the U.S. every year.

In fact, there are more than 250,000 women living in the U.S. who were diagnosed with breast cancer under age 40.

One young woman is diagnosed with breast cancer every 45 minutes.

Breast cancer accounts for 26 percent of all cancer in women 15-39 years of age and 39 percent of all cancer in 35-39 year-olds.

Young women’s breast cancers are generally more aggressive and result in lower survival rates.

### The Issues

**Body Image:** It may be challenging for some women to embrace their new body after breast cancer-related surgery.

**Relationships & Dating:** Whether married, single, intimacy issues may arise for women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer.

**Fertility:** Breast cancer treatment may affect a woman’s future plans to have children.

**Early Onset Menopause:** Chemotherapy and hormonal treatments can sometimes bring on premature menopause. Symptoms of menopause can significantly impact quality of life.

**Financial Challenges:** Breast cancer can dramatically impact a woman’s financial stability when it pertains to workplace issues, lack of health insurance or being under-insured.

*Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Young Survival Coalition*

rides, because it is an hallmark event of YSC and to raise money for an organization that is a “big part of my life.”

“Now’s my chance to give back,” says Baird.

For her efforts, one of the sponsors, Giant bicycle company, gave her and dozens of other survivors road bikes, Giant Avail 3 (retail value of \$915) for their efforts.

National YSC Board President Lisa Frank says the intent of Tour de Pink is to raise funds, about \$1 million annually, and awareness that young women can and do get breast cancer.

“By riding through our local communities, we can spread the word that a young woman diagnosed with breast cancer does not have to face her journey alone,” says Frank, herself a four-time breast cancer survivor.

“Through the amazing fundraising efforts of its participants, this ‘rolling community’ enables YSC to offer a wide variety of programming and support to the 250,000 women living in the U.S. today who were diagnosed before their 41st birthday.”