Bond of friendship stronger with Lou Gehrig diagnosis

By Susan Wood

When John Winkelman wakes up Christmas morning, the 1977 South Tahoe High School graduate and his class buddies will have the comfort of knowing they share the greatest gift of all – an everlasting friendship that long sustains the presence of the person.

Two years into it, Winkelman is dying of Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) – better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The debilitating illness that attacks the spinal cord and nerve cells of one out of every 100,000 people has taken away his ability to talk. But that setback has not deterred him from communicating with his friends who gather to share good times, laughs and understanding.

"It really is a celebration when we get together," STHS grad Lynn Corey of Sacramento said.

John Winkelman skied in the 1980 Winter Games. Photos/Provided

The friends are spread out with Winkelman living in Los Altos.

The Tahoe bond remains strong. The 51-year-old returns to the South Shore for the STHS homecoming every year.

This fall 65 people showed up to play bocce ball. The sport has turned into a mainstay of activity. And why wouldn't it? Winkelman was a first-class athlete in high school, playing football. He even placed 18th in downhill ski racing at the Lake Placid Winter Games in 1980.

"I remember thinking that this is a man who was always an athlete, skied in the Olympics, played hockey on three different teams. The idea this athletic person was going to be reduced to an amuscular person was devastating," said Corey, who drops what she's doing whenever the group calls.

People who know Winkelman may contribute to a website called the Caring Bridge to share thoughts on their friend

Corey stressed how when she and a handful of friends from STHS meet up, there's lots of laughing – sometimes over crazy antics when they were young. She shared classes with Winkleman.

She recalled how Winkelman was supportive, like a brother, when she took her military father's Jeep out for a joy ride with him.

After high school, time escaped until they reunited and ended up at Steamers Bar for a drink. She was troubled by watching him struggle with swallowing, a symptom of the disease. She learned about his prognosis about 10 months ago. From then on, the friends have met at an accelerated pace.

"I just didn't want the next time I see him to be at his funeral," she said.

Rob Miller, another friend and fellow grade, agrees. For Miller, the experience has hit close to home. His father died of ALS in 1981, so he witnessed firsthand the wrath of the

disease. Most patients die between three to five years after diagnosis, but one-fifth of them live beyond that mark.

“It’s hard because I know what lies ahead for him. As a group, we try to do all we can,” he said.

Since Winkelman wants his home remodeled and is unable to perform the work, Miller is bringing a contractor over to help.

“I knew John would be needing help,” he said.

The men played football together in high school, but Miller was adamant that they’re closer now.

“His attitude is strong, and he still has his wit,” Miller said.

It’s as though Winkelman is helping his friends discover what’s important in life. And along the way, Winkelman has had his own epiphanies about the true meaning of success and living a life as a good person. The husband and father of two admits to being “overwhelmed” by the show of support from friends.

“Having a good reliable friend is like oxygen to me. I have to have it. All fires start small in your fireplace. With some work, you get it to where you want it, then enjoy it. I am now enjoying the warmth of my good, reliable friends,” he said via email. “It feels great. May the STHS Viking spirit live on!”

He said he doesn’t want to be remembered as a good athlete, but much more.

“I was gifted to be good at whatever sport I played. How I want to be remembered is summed up in a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson. It has nothing to do with trophies, medals or places. It measures success,” he said.

The poem called “Success” reads:

“To laugh often and love much; to win the respect of intelligent persons and the affection of children; to earn the approbation of honest critics and to endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to give of one’s self; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to have played and laughed with enthusiasm and sung with exultation; to know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived – this is to have succeeded.”

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