

2-time breast cancer survivor conquers Mt. Shasta



Linda Kaczmar of South Lake Tahoe climbs Avalanche Gulch on Mount Shasta after sunrise June 22. Photos/Jeff Kaczmar

By Kathryn Reed

Today will be Linda Kaczmar's last reconstructive surgery. It is one of many milestones for her in 2013.

It was not a decision she thought she would have to make again. When she went through all the breast cancer treatments 10 years ago she believed she was done with oncology wards.

But a lump in the same breast, discovered by a self-exam – like the first – that also didn't show up on an X-ray, was enough to get her to see her doc.

It was back. And this time she was going in for a double

mastectomy.

However, Kaczmar wasn't about to let cancer get in the way of plans she had already made.



At the summit – 14,179 feet.
Jeff Kaczmar, from left,
Steve Bannar, Linda Kaczmar,
Chris Kozlowski, and John
Dayberry (standing).

Before the January diagnosis she decided that same month to climb Mount Shasta – again. On the first attempt 10 years ago she didn't summit. Her friend Chris Kozlowski said absolutely she would be alongside her on the trail this time. Then Stella Ortega joined in on the training.

And so began the South Lake Tahoe women's – Quest for Shasta, 3 Girls and a Mountain.

Kaczmar credits her doctors at UC San Francisco for arranging their schedules to work with her training and desire to conquer the 14,179-foot mountain.

On June 21 (the summer solstice) – what had become an expedition of three girls and three guys – reached Helen Lake base camp at 10,000 feet. Ortega was not feeling well the next day and ended her quest there.

The others headed out about 2:30am June 22 with headlamps on. Soon those were put in packs and the five were walking under the light of the super moon.

The men along on the ascent were Kaczmar's 28-year-old son Jeff, Steve Bannar – who two years ago performed knee replacement surgery on Kaczmar, and John Dayberry.

All five had their own stories about why they wanted to climb this mystical mountain that is the No. 1 Earth chakra. But the overriding reason was to accompany Kaczmar on her path to the top.

"The mountain was good to me that day. She helped me summit," Kaczmar told *Lake Tahoe News*. She is the first to admit the climb was not easy – "it was very, very hard." After all, it was 7,000 vertical feet.

At one point Bannar gave her a stern pep talk. Her son spoke words of encouragement. Kozłowski knew their training would pay off.



Going to base camp, from left, Chris Kozłowski, Steve Bannar, Linda Kaczmar, Stella Ortega, Jeff Kaczmar and John Dayberry.

“She was really struggling. We both agreed it was more than just us there. There’s a lot of energy on that mountain,” Dayberry said. “We had those discussions about heavy power points like Cave Rock and other sacred places. You have to tap into that. You gain healing and you gain energy from that and you go with that.”

Then, about 500 feet from the top they came across a woman “stuck” on the trail, saying she couldn’t make it. Bannar said, “Oh yes, you can” and took her pack. Kaczmar told her about being a two-time breast cancer survivor and she was going to the top and pulled the woman along. The woman, in her 20s, was there for her brother’s girlfriend who was diagnosed with breast cancer.

This Northern California mountain calls to many who have been touched by cancer. It’s the spirituality of the peak, the energy it emits. When Kaczmar was on the mountain 10 years ago she was with a group from the Breast Cancer Fund.

This time the fivesome did the climb without a guide.

A woman on the first expedition told Kaczmar, “It isn’t about the summit, it’s the journey on the mountain.”

And while today that is true for all of them, the Champagne Kozlowski popped open at the top flowed just as freely as the congratulatory hugs. There was something powerful about summing – an accomplishment that the healthiest of climbers can be proud of.

Kaczmar turns 60 in November. The next adventure for this two-time cancer survivor is to have a voyage of some kind with her younger son who was not able to make the Shasta Climb.