



John Ravenna
Cyclist 2014

This month's Rider Profile is a heartfelt story of love and dedication written by John Ravenna about his late wife Rita and the mission of Team Rita.

Rita Ravenna was a beautiful, intelligent and creative woman who was taken from us far too early. She could do anything and do it well. She was always healthy and active. She loved to run, play basketball, ski, walk her dog, create mosaics and work in her garden. She was a world traveler and could organize great adventures to the most remote corners of the world. She had a pied piper-like relationship with children and a soft spot in her heart for funny looking dogs, especially boxers.

In December 2013, Rita discovered a mysterious, painless bruise-like lump in her upper thigh. She went to the emergency room and followed up with several visits to her general practitioner and vascular doctor who thought it was just a bruise, even though there was no trauma. Finally, in mid-March 2014, after repeated visits to the doctor, an MRI confirmed that it was a solid tumor that needed immediate attention.

We considered going to a number of other medical facilities including Sloan-Kettering, but we decided on Yale-New Haven Hospital and Smilow Cancer Hospital as they have an excellent reputation and were a lot more convenient. We started treatment with the Orthopedic Oncology team of Dr. Gary Friedlaender, who diagnosed the tumor as metastatic melanoma. The tumor was determined to be inoperable so we were quickly referred to Dr. Mario Sznol, who is renowned for his cutting edge work in immune therapies. These therapies have proven to be the most effective treatment against metastatic melanoma. Dr. Sznol's incredibly caring team gives real hope to people with metastatic melanoma, the diagnosis of which was once thought to be a death sentence. Unfortunately, I wish I could say there was a happy ending, but I can't. Rita's treatment did not go as well as we hoped. Between the late diagnoses of the disease, compounded by an unfortunate negative reaction to one of the immune therapies, she lost her battle against the cancer surrounded by her family on August 3, 2014. She was 53 years old.

Rita's death was a devastating, life-altering event for our family and friends. While in treatment, when we were still optimistic about the prognosis, she mentioned that she wanted to be a part of the Closer to Free Ride. As an avid cyclist, I naturally agreed. Three days before her death, she and I had one of our many heart-to-heart talks and she said to me, "... after I die, get on your bike and just ride."

The day after she died, we were compelled to do something special to honor Rita's life. Deborah Lasala, one of our dear friends and also avid cyclist, took the initiative and signed up for Closer to Free and set up "Team Rita." It was not difficult recruiting a team of 13 other highly motivated riders to join Deb and me. The Ride gave us a positive outlet for our grief and we dedicated ourselves, with the support of incredibly generous donors, to raise more than \$23,000 for Smilow Cancer Hospital in a little more than a month.

On behalf of Rita Ravenna, "Team Rita," and the donors, I hope our contribution in some small way can help find cure for metastatic melanoma, which claims far too many people still in the prime of their lives. "Team Rita" will ride again in 2015 and new members are welcome.

