



Christine Festa
Volunteer 2016, 2015, 2014 and 2011

One of the highlights of every Closer to Free Ride is the Smilow Salute, when our riders get to see and embrace the staff and patients they're riding for. This year is Christine Festa's second year volunteering with the Smilow Salute Cheer Team. Her surgery and recovery at Smilow in 2014 coincided with the Closer To Free Ride, where she found herself down on the street experiencing something that would stick with her forever. She knew she needed to be back after her discharge.

"During my stay at Smilow, I didn't know the results of my biopsies but I did know, deep down, that remaining in a positive frame of mind was the right path," she remembers. "I was determined to let everyone know by my smile that I was strong." Christine's nurses, doctors and other caregivers at Smilow responded to and supported her positive attitude. She gained just as much by venturing off her floor to attend the Ride.

She was inspired to watch the Ride primarily for those patients who could not physically make it downstairs. It was not easy to get her moved out for the trip to the street but her nurse made sure she was ready – at least PJ's would be a step-up from a hospital gown! Downstairs, Volunteer Annie Kaplan zoomed right in on her in an attempt to feed her. Upon learning that Christine was on a clear liquid diet, Annie sent her husband to buy her an apple juice. "I am still amazed by how welcoming and supportive the entire group was," Christine says. "Their generous kindness gave me strength and hope."

Christine remembers being down on the street to watch the ride with so many from Smilow. "There is an energy you can feel when watching that 'wall of riders' move past you - it's electrifying!" she recalls. "You know instinctively that, along with riding for their own loved ones, they 'Ride for YOU'. The riders' energy is combined with that of the patients, caregivers and volunteers in attendance; some holding posters and cheering exuberantly, some quiet and reflective, all demonstrating their gratitude to the riders – It is so inspiring!"

A CTF Ride marshal abruptly approached Christine and said "I want to take a picture with you" as he pointed to her. "It was an incredible feeling, that someone I didn't even know wanted me to know that my condition mattered – not just to my friends and family but even to a stranger," she marvels. As a volunteer, Christine recognized that same marshal at the 2015 Ride and was also able to cheer on her oncologist, Dr. Deshpande, as he biked past Smilow.

Christine says that volunteering on the CTF Ride is an honor. While shy to solicit for donations, having a page on the CTF Ride website makes it easier. She's grateful to ALL donors to CTF and for all that the Ride provides. "I truly wish every patient could experience what I was blessed to receive in person from the CTF Ride", she says. "In some small way I want to pay-it-forward and be there for other patients in honor of Annie, my fabulous nurses and caregivers, Drs. Han, Deshpande & Rutherford and their associates, and everyone I've met through CTF. My goal is to make another patient feel as special as they all made me feel that awesome autumn morning."

