6 Questions with...
Sue Weldon

Diagnosed with breast cancer at 39, former gymnast and Philadelphia native Sue Weldon went on a mission. She founded uniteforher.org, and in 2018 will celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Pink Invitational, held at the Pennsylvania Convention Center. The proceeds go to women with breast cancer. Married for 30 years with three grown kids, Weldon has much to live for. IG editor Dwight Normile recently spoke with her, and her passion for helping people shines like a beacon in this interview.

As a breast cancer survivor, what has been the most rewarding aspect of the Pink Invitational?

The Pink Invitational was created to help move forward the mission of Unite for HER, which was to help women affected by breast cancer to get access to complementary therapies. Things like acupuncture, yoga, massage therapy, counseling, sexual health, all things that aren’t covered by standard care.

What’s been so empowering is to see how far the Pink Invitational and the gymnastics community has been able to move our mission forward, treating over 1,000 women a year. And the young women and girls that come to the Pink Invitational—it’s their favorite meet. They feel so empowered to have this platform to give back … and to see it grow into more than just a meet. It’s a mission for these young girls. They feel like they are part of something that is bigger than all of us. All united as one.

How did you discover gymnastics?

I was a young girl, and Nadia Comaneci was my girl in the ‘70s, watching her and Olga Korbut. Oh, my gosh, I want to do that. So I used to flip around in my yard in northeast Philadelphia. My dad was flipping me around on a steel metal bar. That’s how I started [laughs]. But I actually did (gymnastics for) 13 years. I graduated from West Chester University, and I was on their team as well (1982-86). And then I coached for 27 years.

Where did you coach?

AJS Pancott, who is our host gymnast [for the Pink Invitational]. They are incredibly impactful and important to the whole execution of this incredible meet. … incredible reputation of running meets, and that’s where I coached for over 20 years.

When I was diagnosed I was a high level coach at AJS Pancott, and had all these young girls that were just asking so many questions about how this could happen to their coach who was so young, 39. And then asking about healthy lifestyles and changes they could think about doing so they could be preventative and overall health and wellness. And we just saw this wonderful platform of education for our girls.

Laurie Hernandez (back row center) was the celebrity gymnast in 2017, and will be again in 2018.

That’s how the Pink Invitational really came about … to give these girls a place where they can really be active, and learning and educating them about the importance of a healthy lifestyle and also giving back to women in need.

What did being named the 2016 Be Well Philly Health Hero mean to you?

Philadelphia Magazine has this wonderful outreach where they are able to just get all of Philadelphia involved in choosing a health hero. When I was nominated by our team here and our women, it really was our women I felt like I won for. I was representing the 1,000 women that we end up treating every year. And they were all out there voting. It was just so nice to be recognized for the work that we’re doing in the industry through Philadelphia Magazine, and IBX (Independence Blue Cross) was the sponsor that moved that forward.

Oh, it was humbling … and honored … I’m a survivor, you know, and trying to find a better way, which I did find when I was ill and actually going through my treatment and diagnosis. I incorporated acupuncture into my treatment and nutrition and massage therapy and yoga, and all these things that weren’t covered (by health insurance). And to be able to share that with other women so that they could have a treatment plan and a survivorship plan that really impacts their health and wellness more than traditional prescription drugs. It’s life changing for them.

So this health hero award gave us the opportunity to showcase Unite for HER and all the good work that we’re doing. We’re so hands on in the breast cancer community, and every one of our women gets $2,000 worth of treatments to use and gets education and empowerment through a workshop called Wellness Day to learn how these therapies are scientifically research-based and can really make a difference in their healing.

We partner with over 30 hospitals and breast cancer affiliates and cancer centers in order to deliver this mission. And the Pink Invitational and all these young girls—they have helped us move that needle, and that’s all with the help of AJS Pancott Gymnastics … hosting a very remarkable gymnastics meet, and then couple it with a fundraising event, which allows us to raise $500,000 each year at this event.

Since 2009, how much money has the Pink Invitational raised for cancer patients?

Over $2.5 million. And 100 percent goes right to our women … which is really important to know that that money these girls are raising all goes to our women to help them get into our program and sustain them for a full year.

What are the dates for the 2018 Pink Invitational, and who will be the celebrity gymnast?

February 23rd to the 25th, and we just announced that Laurie Hernandez is coming back (she was the celebrity gymnast in 2017), who is dynamic and such a sweetheart. And we also have Val Kondos Field coming from UCLA.

We’re just excited to be able to celebrate 10 years of empowering all these young girls to give back to a sport that they love and be educated in a mission that’s grounded in prevention and being proactive in your health and wellness. And that’s what they learn.---

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