



COURTESY PHOTOS

PROFILE

MICHELE BALDWIN

Paddleboarding the Ganga

When Michele Baldwin made it to Colorado after traveling across Tibet, she found herself in Crested Butte. As a single mother of three, she worked on the mountain in the winter and in the rivers through the summer, behind the bar and in the shops, anywhere she could to survive.

It was part of a mission to give her girls the life she wanted them to have in paradise. Now that the girls have grown, Baldwin, through her own unfortunate circumstances, has found a new way to work for the future of women.

Baldwin, who has terminal cervical cancer, completed another adventurous and important mission this fall: she became the first woman to stand-up paddleboard down the Ganga River in India as a means of raising awareness of and money for the fight against cervical cancer.

Baldwin, who is 45 and now living in Albuquerque, brought many of the lessons she learned in Crested Butte with her on her journey, down the Ganga from the base of the Himalayas in Rishikesh 700 miles to the holy city of Varanasi. She's been told since returning it was a women's long-distance paddleboarding world record.

"The time—both day and night—on the Ganga was amazing, peaceful, and healing to my spirit," says Baldwin of her journey, which lasted most of October and November. "There were adventures as only India can provide. Four hundred million Indians live along this sacred river, and it accepts life and death, equally."

Her expedition, the Starry Ganga, was planned and put together quickly over the fall of 2011 after Baldwin's metastatic cervical cancer returned for a third and final time, after two earlier rounds of abdominal surgery and chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

To make her Starry Ganga expedition possible, Baldwin collaborated with the Global Initiative Against HPV and Cervical Cancer (GIAHC, www.giahc.org), an American nonprofit organization working in India to help prevent cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer is the second most deadly cancer among women worldwide, and is an especially serious problem in India, where it kills 74,000 women a year and accounts for the highest number of deaths for women there.

"This expedition is a selfless idea," GIAHC founder and physician Dr. Shobha Krishnan says. "The river is sacred, and so are women's lives. Michele's dedication to the cause is remarkable, and we are grateful for her steadfastness to raise awareness about this disease. Hers is an effort that will go down in history some day. Millions of women will be grateful to Michele for saving their lives."

Baldwin hoped to raise \$100,000 to support GIAHC and its efforts,

although just \$10,000 has been collected to date. The money will help the organization set up pilot programs for preventing cervical cancer in India.

Baldwin first traveled alone to and lived in India at the age of 19, where she met Mother Theresa and fell in love with the country and its varied cultures. She returned for an extended stay several years later. She has trained and worked as a nurse, midwife, doula, real estate agent, ski lift operator, white water rafting guide, kayak river guide, and, most recently, a paramedic and emergency medical services technician. It was only recently that she learned the sport of stand-up paddleboarding, in southern California.

By August, two months after being told there was no longer any treatment available for her cervical cancer, her dream began to take shape. "It came to me like a little secret whispered in my ear," Baldwin says. "It's an original synthesis of pilgrimage, athletic challenge, and opportunity to raise awareness about the cancer I have, which kills 250,000 women a year worldwide. So it's not so much as a want, but something I feel I must do."

"I paddled a 12 and a half-foot custom inflatable paddleboard made and donated by ULI. When I got tired I occasionally sat on a foam yoga block, then used a short paddle, also there were extra tow rings put on my board so I could be towed while I briefly rested, stretched or did yoga."

"Nat Stone, the cameraman, navigator, and waterman, accompanied me rowing a custom-rigged sculling canoe. Nat has rowed, paddled, or sculled over 10,000 miles solo on different waterways, from the Mississippi to the Mekong in Laos," she continued. "We made at least 25 miles a day, most days paddling in two four-hour sessions, and sometimes three, making for long days. We carried our own food and supplies and camped most nights along the banks of the Ganga. Every three or four days we met up with our support crew traveling by minivan."

"As a lifelong Buddhist facing my own certain death in the near future, I wanted time to meditate quietly for hours a day while floating/paddling on the most sacred river in the world. Now, I want to inspire others to be fearless. Do your own dreams, reach further than you thought possible, help more than you imagine you are able."

Baldwin emphasizes that cervical cancer can be prevented, with early detection through a simple Pap test. She hopes to get the message of cervical cancer awareness across to women and all people in India.

In a candid personal account posted on her starryganga.com website, Baldwin tells the story of how she failed to get a Pap test for ten years, for a variety of reasons including lack of medical insurance, and then failed to heed symptoms of a problem. This summer her cervical cancer, despite her previous surgeries and treatments, had advanced to where her oncological team at a major National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center had to tell her no further treatments were possible.

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For the women of the Gunnison Valley, her message is simple: "Get a PAP test, even through it's easy in Paradise to forget to do it regularly." While living in Crested Butte she worked for Crested Butte Mountain Resort and for Three Rivers Resort as a raft guide. But despite all of her hard work, it wasn't enough and finances forced her to leave the valley in 2009.

"Living in Crested Butte taught me to enjoy every day. That's a useful lesson for dying," she said. "I gave up a career and decided to live each day and love it. That's what you learn in Crested Butte. All you have to do to be happy is look up and look outside. Every day is so precious."

After her cancer became terminal, she went back to working on the river. "It was there I noticed how hours could go by without one thought of

cancer. I kept thinking how fun it would be to stand on the water, floating peacefully down the Rio Grande. Stand-up paddling was about to change my life, again, as the idea for Starry Ganga came to me over the course of a few weeks."

In early October a PET exam showed her cancer spreading. "It was a race to get on the water, paddle my heart out, and then raise the funds for GIAHC before I get too weak," says Baldwin.

"No one should die of cervical cancer," she says.

Baldwin has returned from her journey and is resting at home with her family in New Mexico. People who wish to support her cause can donate to the Global Initiative Against HPV and Cervical Cancer at www.giahc.org, Michele Baldwin Living Memorial. To learn more about Baldwin and her expedition, visit starryganga.com.

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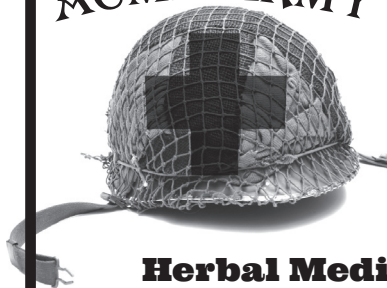


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