



# Travelogue

Hawai'i:  
Good food, friendship  
and elders' blessings  
yield 'ohara,' healing  
for cancer survivors

'Living vicariously through the adventures of our friends'

'Kimikeo was saying that ahi was needed to help keep his community healthy. I knew I was brought to Maui to do the same thing for the cancer survivors. Each day I worked and prepared meals, I remembered why I was at the camp.'

## Cooking for Athletes 4 Cancer: 'Ahi' gains new name, culinary calling on Maui

By MARK WHITEHEAD

*Chef Mark Whitehead regularly goes to Hawaii, and, yes, he enjoys the sunshine, the beaches, and all the charms of the Aloha State.*

*But his visits are more about service to others, and the gifts received. In recent years, Whitehead has made 10 trips to the islands to cook meals for Athletes 4 Cancer camps. What started as mostly culinary has evolved as mostly spiritual for the 50-year-old Eugene native. This spring, Whitehead wrote about his times in Hawaii and his deep sense of being as "Ahi."*

Right after high school, I tried going to college, but it didn't appeal to me. I was working as a cook and my father didn't like that career path. So one day I came home and there were two options laying on the desk for me. One was an application to the Air Force via my Dad, and the other was an up and coming culinary school in Portland that my Mom found in an article in the newspaper. I thought about it for about 30 seconds and culinary school won out.

Over time, I worked in the culinary industry and was always searching for the perfect way to give back. The culinary career path had many rewards in making people happy through food and hospitality. However, I was still searching for a way to give and tried many avenues, like feeding the homeless. In Eugene, I helped create breakfast for 200 people. I also worked at the local food bank. I even tried coaching the Special Olympics for a couple of years. Here in Hood River, I have also donated my time at the Food Bank, Warming Shelter, Empty Bowls, and many other food-related outreach programs.

Then one day, a friend I hadn't seen for a while stopped by the hotel to visit. As she walked out the door, she mentioned "Athletes 4 Cancer" and she told me a little bit about the idea for a new camp on Maui. I joked, "I bet you need a Chef to come along with you." By my surprise, the very next day, Tonia Farman, the founder of the organization, was at my door interviewing me to help out. Less than a month later, I was on a plane to Maui not knowing what I had gotten myself into.

Tonia started "Kiteboarding 4 Cancer" to honor her brother, who passed away after a year and a half battle against Leukemia at age 19. The first year event was a huge success and they donated the proceeds

to the hospital her brother stayed at. The next year Tonia, her husband and Doctor Garret were brainstorming about a new idea of how to donate the money raised at "Kiteboarding for Cancer."

They came up with "Athletes 4 Cancer," a camp that revolved around surfing, stand up paddling, canoeing, and other outdoor activities. This camp was to help 19-35 year old cancer survivors get back a life normality which cancer had deprived them of. Through the help of the "John Wayne Cancer Foundation" and other grant money, the campers get to experience a true Hawaiian adventure. Some of these campers have never seen the ocean before! The idea behind the camps is to use adventure-based experiences such as surfing, outrigger canoeing, and standup paddling as channels of healing and life-renewal that treat the mind, body, and soul. Athletes for Cancer's programs aim to help young survivors not just survive, but thrive in all aspects of life.

A typical day at camp starts at 6 a.m. for breakfast. Every year it surprises me how close strangers can be after just having met one another. By 7 a.m., the campers head out to surf while I stay behind to prepare meals. I try to prepare nutritious, organic, and local cuisine to be served each day. This requires close to 14 hours of cooking and prepping every day. After a full day of activities, we conclude the evening with a campfire. This isn't your typical campfire. Here we discuss the multitude of emotions that come with having to battle cancer. The campers feel comfortable opening up to one another because they understand what each of them has been through. One of the traditions at camp is to come up with a power name that best represents yourself and that is the name you go by for the week.

At my first camp, we chose power names for each other by asking certain questions about one another. Through this process, my new name of Ahi was born. Ahi means tuna in Hawaiian. The next year when I went to camp, I had the option to change my name.

One of the outings is to surprise the campers with an all-day excursion of outrigger canoeing at the Kihei Canoe Club. I always go along for this excursion. Upon arrival at the canoe club, we are warmly greeted by children and adults, who are singing

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Photos courtesy of Tonia Farman

ON MAUI, Mark Whitehead accepts blessings from Koa, who guided the group on the outrigger journey to the ancient fish ponds. Kekoa thanked each volunteer for their part in the ongoing task of rebuilding the fish ponds, which sustain life for the people of the islands. In photos below, Whitehead and the rest of the crew of survivors and volunteers bring the canoe back onto the beach following the journey; Athletes 4 Cancer founder Tonia Farman and Whitehead stand at Ho'okipa Beach, a popular surfing and paddling location; Whitehead with his Ahi's Ohana surfboard at Thursday Gorge Grown Market.



### 'HE PUTS SO MUCH LOVE IN HIS FOOD'

Mark Whitehead grew up in Eugene and lived there and in Hawaii before moving to Hood River 13 years ago. The former cooking instructor and long-time chef at the former Cornerstone Cuisine started his own business, Ahi's Ohana Catering, in 2014. He and his wife, Sophie, a Mid Valley Elementary teacher, have a daughter, Gabriella, a 2014 HRVHS graduate, who attends University of Oregon, Mark's alma mater.

"Mark (aka 'Ahi') provides a healing component at our retreats with his food that seriously positively impacts lives," said Athletes 4 Cancer founder Tonia Farman. "He puts so much love in his food, but with a grace and humility that inspires everyone around him. Often many of our cancer survivors have dietary restrictions and allergies post-cancer that makes planning meals a challenge. Not for Mark — he sees it as an opportunity to help someone find flavorful and healthy options despite their restrictions. Ahi's cooking has become such an integral focus of our retreat program, that we have started to explore running a cooking retreat for cancer survivors. But Mark has to run it!"

Care to taste it for yourself? People registered in this year's Hood River Kiteboarding 4 Cancer event can experience Ahi's food for their lunch in the Athlete's Lounge on Saturday, July 11.

### NEAR AND FAR

This spring and summer, Hood River News' Kaleidoscope will feature places in our own backyard and all around the world, along with the general array of B1 topics.

Look for:

- Near — locales in the Gorge such as Jackson Park in Hood River and Mt. Hood Railroad terminus in Parkdale, and;
- Far — places as disparate as Alaska and Borneo, as we continue a new rotation of "Travelogues" written by local residents.

A few words about "Travelogues": This recurring feature strives to go beyond a vacation report, and looks at adventures,

service projects or other involved experiences that readers would be willing to write about and provide high resolution photos. Past Travelogues included work at a school and clinic in Nepal, teaching a week-long ski trip in Finland, and helping found an orphanage in Guatemala.

If you would like to submit your idea about recent travel or a planned adventure for Travelogues, email hrnews@hoodrivernews.

Since we rely on the traveler to write the article, we ask that the suggestion come directly from the traveler; if you have a friend you think did something interesting, ask them to contact us.