

Tree of Friends Foundation

A new seedling fund, now rooted, starts to take form:

The Tree of Friends Foundation (ToFF) venture started as a gentle glow...you know, the kind of warmth you feel during those perfect conversations among friends that leave you feeling connected and inspired. We are a group of buddies cresting the point in life where the daily grind and struggle to make ends meet starts to give way to searching for a purpose...then bringing it to life. It was during long runs together that our ideas were born and began to take shape. In those honest times, when your heart pours out as you struggle to catch your breath, we quickly passed through current troubles and issues and began to discuss all of the things we're grateful for ...life, love, happiness and healthy children. In the end, I suppose that the things that led us to create this Foundation are the very things that drew us together to begin with...the common goals of challenging, supporting and inspiring each other to compete in physical tests of endurance while raising awareness, applying our collective volunteering resources and meeting the financial needs of meaningful local causes in our community.

Our first goal came about when we decided to challenge ourselves to race in the Frederick Half marathon on May 2, 2010...and run it *for a reason*. We chose St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital as our first benevolent mission. As we trained, we found motivation, courage and enthusiasm through learning about and sharing stories of the children at St. Jude's. The camaraderie we felt began to translate naturally into a collective focus on our fundraising efforts. With the support of our friends and family we raised \$10,000 for St. Jude's. At that point, the gentle glow we felt initially sparked into a flame that filled each one of us...and we knew we were onto something. It seems so appropriate that St. Jude's motto is "Hero in You"; because we experienced that passion and are determined to pass along that feeling.

As a result of the wonderful experiences we had in 2010, we decided to renew our efforts in 2011. Because of the overwhelming support we received, we felt it would be most fitting to realize the impact of our efforts in our *own* community. As we began to plan how we would go about finding a worthy local cause; tragedy struck. Our friend passed away suddenly, leaving two small children behind. Aside from our own grieving, we wondered how we could bring just the smallest amount of sunshine and joy to kids who have experienced that kind of heartbreak. Our focus turned to Camp T.R., a weekend bereavement camp held annually for kids who have lost loved ones. We connected with the directors of the camp, run by Carroll Hospice...and our goals immediately came into focus. We raised enough money to cover the operating budget for the camp and we participated in the Cascade Lake Triathlon, a swim, bike, run event right down the road from where our friend lived. After announcing our intentions, we felt an instant connection within our community and the results of our fundraising efforts far exceeded our hopes and expectations. We challenged ourselves emotionally by personally taking part in Camp T.R as counselors. In what felt like no coincidence, our one-on-one camp "buddies" for the weekend were young children who had lost their father suddenly. This incredibly rewarding experience moved us...and brought our efforts full circle, further strengthening our overall mission.

The reassurance we felt as we successfully completed our second set of goals propelled us to narrow our focus and formalize our partnership. Initially operating under the name "Chicks for Charity", we wanted to be more inclusive in our member-base so we created "Tree of Friends Foundation", or ToFF, for short. As we worked through different ideas, the symbol of a tree kept coming back to us. The Shel Silverstein book, "The Giving Tree", spoke to us about giving what we can, for unselfish reasons. Also the image of the tree's branches, leaves, buds and fruit elicits the idea of working together to make something beautiful. The branches represent our "Buddies", our network of friends and family, united and being greater as a whole. In nature, trees will grow; they'll get bigger, become more beautiful and stoic if they're cultivated and maintained. Much like we'll grow if we continue to focus on the "good that we can do".

In writing this, the short path behind us is clearly visible...but what started with a gentle glow now burns bright within us. The warmth it brings and the exciting journey ahead inspires us...

...and it is within this process....we're finding ourselves...

"I live for those who love me, for those who know me true; for the heaven that smiles above me and awaits my spirit too. For the cause that lacks assistance, for the wrong that needs resistance, for the future in the distance, and the good that I can do." – G. Linnaeus Banks .