



## News Release

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### **Michele Baldwin to Paddle the Ganga River to Raise \$100,000 for Cervical Cancer Awareness/Prevention**

*UNM Cancer Center patient and Albuquerque resident travels to India  
on October 17 to begin 700-mile paddleboard journey*

**Albuquerque, NM – October 12, 2011** – Michele Baldwin was diagnosed with cervical cancer two years ago. In June, after two intensive rounds of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation treatment, she discovered that her cancer had returned. Facing the near-certainty of an early death, it didn't take Baldwin long to figure out her next move: a paddleboard expedition down the Ganga River (formerly known as the Ganges) in India. The idea was irresistible, like "a little secret whispered in my ear," she says.

An unusual choice, perhaps, but one deeply rooted in Baldwin's life and commitments. She is a Buddhist, and the Ganga is one of the world's most sacred rivers. Baldwin, who lives in Albuquerque, has worked as a river guide in New Mexico and Colorado, so she has the skills and appetite for the endeavor. Finally, as a 45-year-old woman with cervical cancer – the second most deadly cancer among women worldwide and a particular scourge in developing countries – Baldwin is determined to help treat and prevent the disease in India, where it kills approximately 79,000 women each year.

Baldwin seeks to raise \$100,000 on her "Starry Ganga" expedition (<http://starryganga.com>) to support the Global Initiative Against HPV and Cervical Cancer, led by Columbia University physician Shobha Krishnan, MD. The money will help GIAHC ([www.giahc.org](http://www.giahc.org)) set up pilot programs for treating and preventing cervical cancer in India – programs which, if successful, Baldwin believes will attract significant philanthropic investment. "My hope is to contribute not just to setting up a single hospital or mobile unit, but actually help Dr. Krishnan implement a national program in India to protect women from the suffering of this disease," Baldwin explains. She leaves for her trip on October 17, and expects to be away for five weeks. If all goes as planned, she will paddle, standing up, a 700-mile stretch of the river that constitutes its "spiritual heart," traveling in tandem with a cameraman, who will document the journey.

*Michele Baldwin's "Starry Ganga" expedition, cont.*

When Baldwin was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2009, she was training to be a paramedic at UNM's Emergency Medical Services Academy. Against the odds, she managed to finish the semester with a 3.8 GPA. With the cancer's spread, she relinquished a scholarship to return this fall and set her sights on India instead.

She has been a patient of the University of New Mexico Cancer Center throughout her illness, receiving what she calls "amazing, first-class care." She believes she and her treatment team have done "everything possible" to fight the disease. Not that "fighting" is the way she thinks about her relationship with cancer these days. With the disease's advance, and the dwindling of treatment options, she has come to embrace the cancer as part of her, feeling for it the compassion and peacefulness she feels for her body. "There's a Buddhist idea that anything you entirely accept ceases in some sense to exist," she says. With that acceptance comes an ability to live life fully and gracefully to the end – one legacy she hopes to leave her children, ages 19, 17 and 12.

Another legacy is this simple message to women: get a regular Pap test. Don't put it off. Since the introduction of Pap tests in the 1950s, cervical cancer rates in the US have fallen by 70 percent. That's because this simple lab test is a highly effective screen for cervical cancer and can actually prevent the disease – which is often slow-growing – by detecting it in its earliest stages. Baldwin understands that lack of insurance, money or time may stand in the way of some women getting the test, but she urges them to get screened anyway. She herself, for all these reasons, put off the test for a decade. Baldwin believes, and most experts would agree, that regular Pap tests would likely have saved her life.

Her legacy to women in India, she hopes, will be to increase cervical cancer awareness, screening and prevention. Scientists have recently discovered that the human papillomavirus, or HPV, is the cause of nearly all cervical cancers, and there is a push in the US and around the world to get girls and young women vaccinated (the vaccine is most effectively before a person is sexually active). As it happens, the UNM Cancer Center is taking a world-leading role in this research. Cancer Center scientists Michelle Ozburn, PhD, and Bryce Chackerian, PhD, are part of a team, led by UNM Professor Cosette Wheeler, PhD, that is studying the illness and developing a new, more effective HPV vaccine. Baldwin's support of the Global Initiative Against HPV and Cervical Cancer will help expand HPV vaccination in India – a step on the road to universal vaccination, which could virtually eliminate cervical cancer.

Baldwin is eager to get the journey started – gracefully navigating this next, perhaps final, bend in the river. Members of the public who wish to support her journey can donate to the Global Initiative Against HPV and Cervical Cancer at [www.giahc.org](http://www.giahc.org). To learn more about Baldwin and her expedition, visit <http://starryganga.com>.

*Michele Baldwin's "Starry Ganga" expedition, cont.*

**About the UNM Cancer Center**

The UNM Cancer Center is the Official Cancer Center of New Mexico and the only National Cancer Institute (NCI)-designated cancer center in the state. One of just 66 NCI-designated cancer centers nationwide, the UNM Cancer Center is recognized for its scientific excellence, contributions to cancer research and delivery of medical advances to patients and their families. It is home to 85 board-certified oncology physicians representing every cancer specialty and 127 research scientists hailing from prestigious institutions such as MD Anderson, Johns Hopkins and the Mayo Clinic. The UNM Cancer Center treats more than 65 percent of the adults and virtually all of the children in New Mexico affected by cancer, from every county in the state. In 2010, it provided care to more than 15,800 cancer patients. The Center's research programs are supported by nearly \$60 million annually in federal and private funding.

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