

FEATURE ARTICLES

Taking on Valley Fever

After 46 years in the nursing field, the instinct to make a difference lives on in retired Arizona nurse.

By Greg Thompson

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What does a 27-year-old major league ball player have in common with an 81-year-old retired nurse?

The unusual link began in June when octogenarian Lois Weston, RN, read an article about Conor Jackson, the Arizona Diamondbacks' first baseman who contracted Valley Fever, a fungal infection that affects 100,000 Arizona residents every year.

Since May, the 6-foot, 2-inch Jackson has been out of action, simply too weak to play major league baseball. As recently as mid-August, the 215-pound athlete had to cut short a minor league rehabilitation stint after going 0 for 10 in three games. According to www.mlb.com, Jackson headed back to Phoenix to see an infectious disease specialist.

The news about the first baseman struck a chord with Weston, whose own daughter-in-law has battled Valley Fever for years. "For some reason I felt that article was directed right to me," said Weston from her home in Mesa, AZ. "I felt like I had to jump on it, and somehow contribute to the effort against Valley Fever. We want to work toward a cure, because it is long overdue."

Taking Action

After graduating as an RN in 1946, Weston spent decades getting a first-hand view of the evolution of medicine. Scourges such as polio were eventually wiped out, so why not Valley Fever, and why not now? Age and energy are not an issue for Weston, who said she feels like she did in her 30s.

The potent combination of good health and positive attitude ultimately led Weston to visit her local bank to learn about funding a charitable organization. The bank advised her to go to a non-profit entity instead, so she immediately went to her local church.

Church contacts connected her to Mark Cosby, president of Room for Joy, a local non-profit organization. Cosby told Weston about the Valley Fever Center for Excellence (VFCE), and plans soon coalesced during a fateful June 30 luncheon where various people, all with a similar passion for combating Valley Fever, decided to form the Valley Fever Corridor Project.

Working with groups such as VFCE and the Valley Fever Alliance, the Corridor Project is essentially a network of people who organize events designed to increase funding and awareness of Valley Fever, which affects 150,000 people a year, two-thirds of which are reported in Arizona. "A month after the June 30 luncheon, we organized two events for this month, plus a fundraising



IN THE VALLEY: Coccidioidomycosis, also known as Valley Fever, is a fungal disease caused by *Coccidioides* species. These organisms live in the soil of semiarid areas. It is a reportable disease in states where the disease is endemic, such as California, New Mexico, Arizona and Nevada. This photomicrograph revealed some of the histopathologic characteristics found within a pus specimen, which had been harvested from a skin lesion in a case of cutaneous coccidioidomycosis. *courtesy CDC*

walk for November," Weston said. "It has all fallen into place as if it was meant to be, and I know it was meant to be."

The first September event took place on Sept. 7; the second will be held Sept. 27, where the Corridor Project will man a booth at the Diamondbacks' Chase Field. With massive fan traffic, combined with Jackson's plight, Weston hopes the events will boost awareness and perhaps even lead to a few donations. The Valley Fever Alliance Walk will take place on Nov. 1, with activities from 8:00 a.m. until noon in downtown Phoenix.

Looking for Zebras

There is an old saying in medical school that if you hear hoof beats, don't go looking for zebras. After all, common symptoms are usually related to common situations. However, if you happen to be in Africa, those hoof beats may indeed be caused by the striped equines. Likewise, if you happen to be in Arizona those symptoms that point to an upper respiratory infection could well mean Valley Fever.

With this in mind, Weston's awareness message does not stop at potential sufferers. She wants physicians in the southwest to keep Valley Fever in mind. In this mission, Weston has a vigorous ally in John Galgiani, MD, director of the VFCE, which is one of the centers for excellence at the University of Arizona College of Medicine.